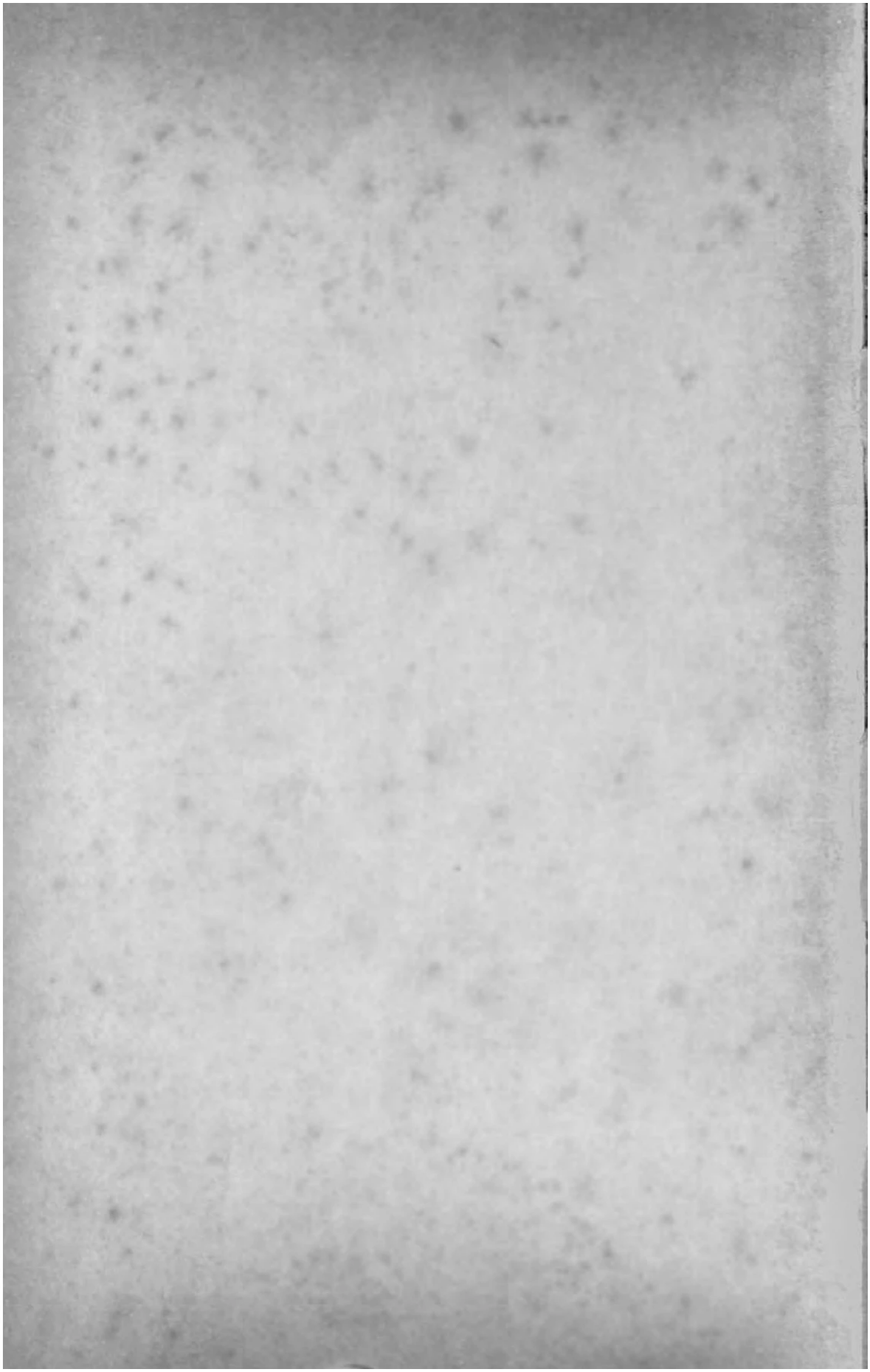
EASY RIDE

by

CARL CORLEY

"THEY RIDE MOTORCYCLES, WEAR LEATHER JACKETS LIKE REAL HE-MEN, BUT THESE HUSTLERS ARE ALL THE SAME — BOYS SELLING THEIR BOXES LIKE GIRLS WHILE BRAGGING WHAT MEN THEY ARE . . ."

FOR ADULTS ONLY



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CARL CORLEY

All characters and situations
in this book are fictitious

A PEC FRENCH LINE BOOK

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6055 Fairmont Ave.
San Diego, Calif. 92120

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Printed in the United States

EUROPEAN DISTRIBUTION BY:
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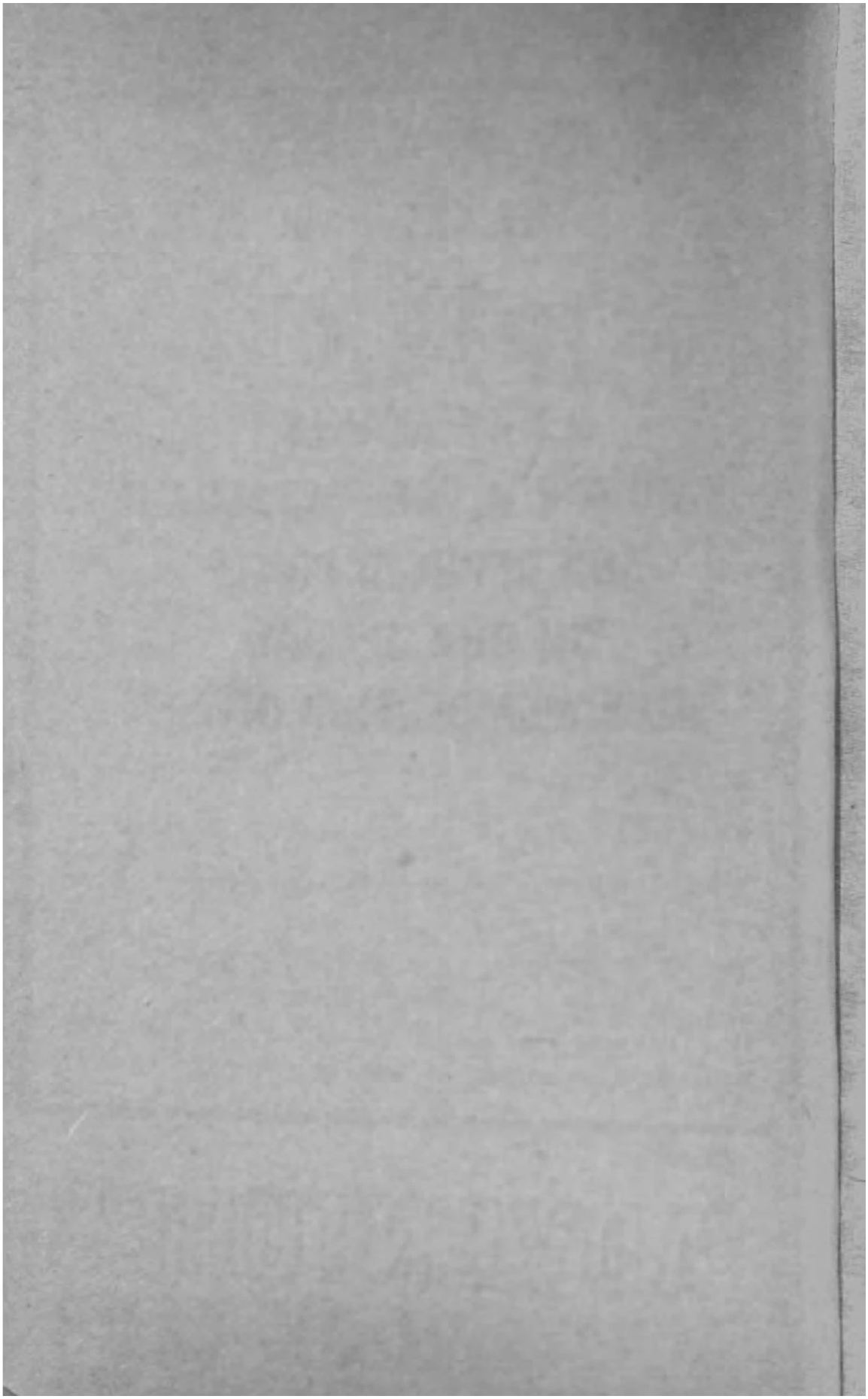

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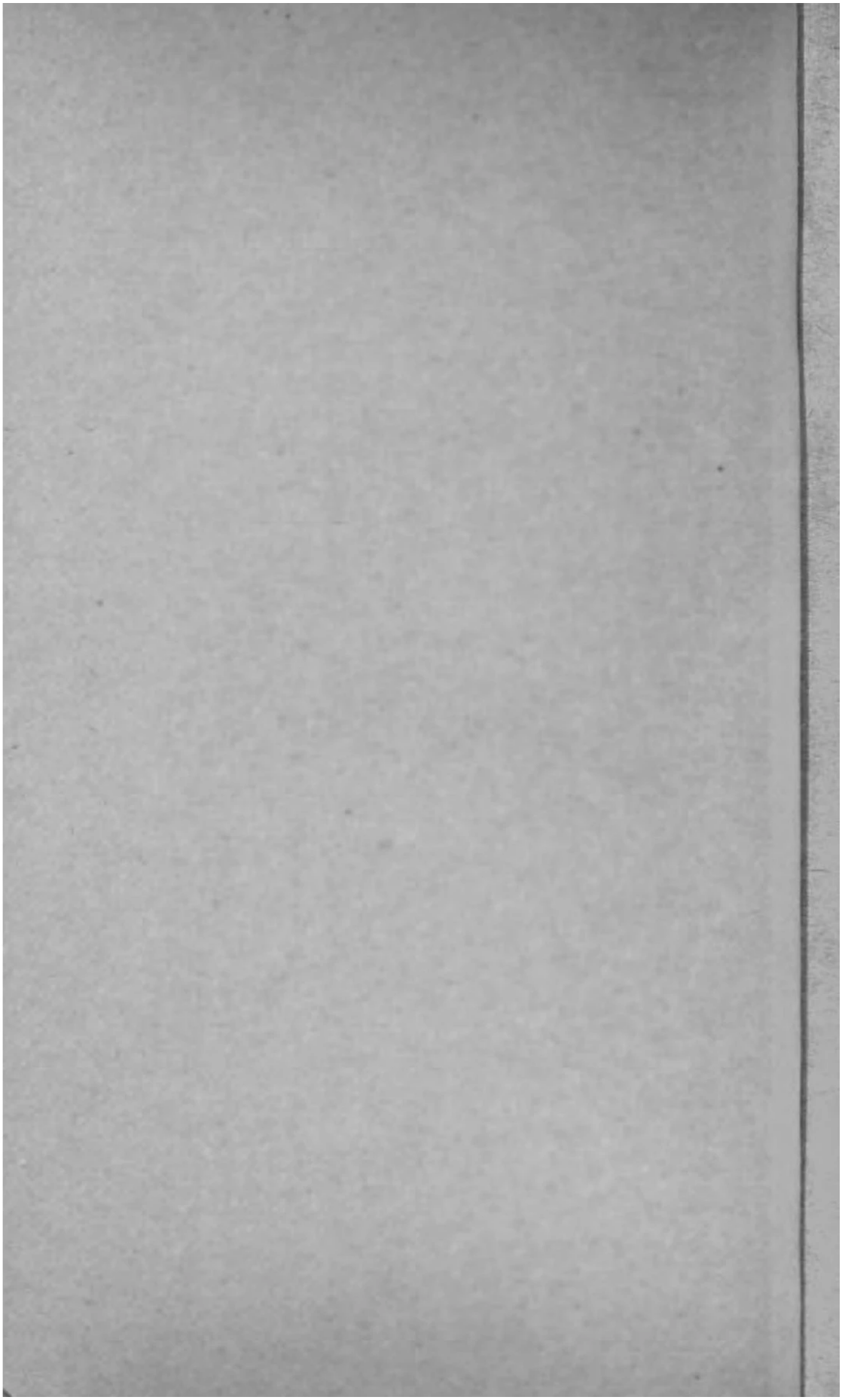

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Jailhouse Queen/Fl-63
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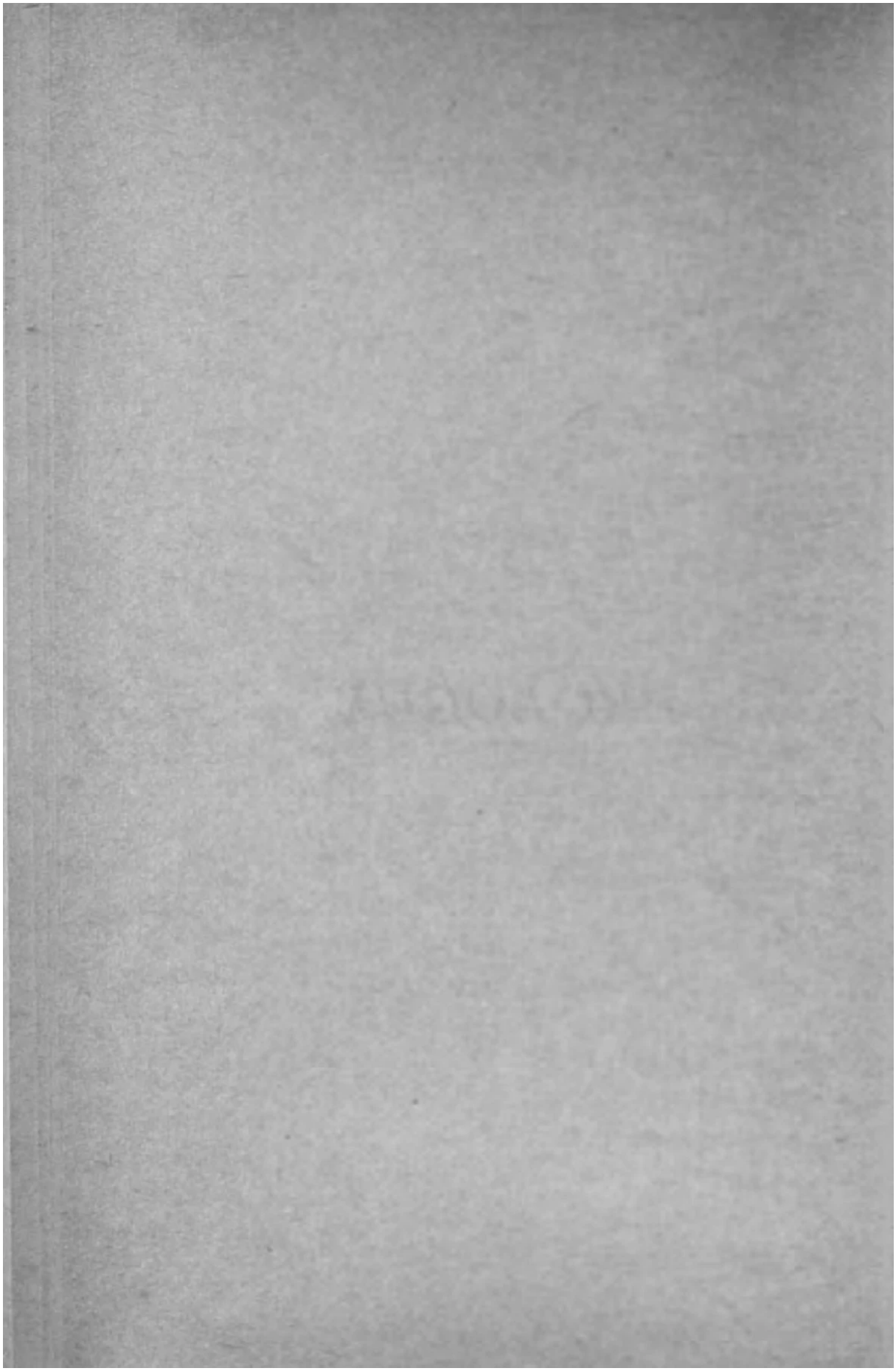
Lezlie/FL-66
Gay Cruise/FL-67
Gay Motel/FL-68
Whisper of Silk/FL-69
Two-Way Street/FL-70
Sisters in Lust/FL-71
Sweet Charlie/FL-72
Gay Tutor/FL-73
Joy Boy/FL-74
Jock Man/FL-75
Sixty-Nine Gay Street/FL-76

Don't think you are going to conceal thoughts by concealing evidence that they ever existed. Don't be afraid . . . to read every book . . . . People who hold unpopular ideas are still part of America, and even if they have ideas that are contrary to our them, and a right to have them in places where they are accessible to others. This must be unquestioned, or it is not America.

Dwight D. Eisenhower
Dartmouth College
June 14, 1953

PROLOGUE



Even after Jesse had come we kept on pushing in and out with little pushes. When he slid out of me I was grinning like crazy.

"Jesus Christ," he said in an awe-stricken voice, "you were wonderful!"

I blushed all over and I'm not the blushing type. I just lay there with my legs apart, letting him look at me, as pleased with myself as if I'd done something really great. It was wonderful to see the look of gratitude and pleasure on his face.

"Hey, close your legs and get dressed," he said. "I don't want to kill myself."

I sighed and gulped down the last of my drink.

"That must be the trouble with your kind of life," I ventured. "Even when you meet a guy you like,

he's gone like a ship in the night."

"Not always," he said. "Some of them ripen into real friendships. The first guy, for instance, stayed with me for four days. Every night we'd go up to his room and jazz like crazy. He showed me pictures of his wife and kids and I felt that I almost knew them."

"But then he vanished," I insisted, "and he's no more than a memory."

"Well, I have my own family!"

That was Jesse.

* * *

Bruce's Lounge was jumping. A number of mat-haired students from L.S.U. were rattling away on the two pinball machines near the entrance as Jesse went in, and the pool tables were surrounded with the town's punks: rat-faced cajuns, dark Frenchmen, swarthy Creoles, all bathed in billows of blue cigarette smoke. They were making as much noise as possible, knocking the brightly colored balls down the length of the billiard tables, not an expert in the crowd, but all bickering, jawing at one another, clamorous in trying to win enough change for a hot meal, a smoke, a beer or two.

Along the bar, dockhands and laborers from the municipal docks in Port Allen sat elbow to elbow, and intermixed with them, hopeful of a free drink, sat a number of bar-girls, waiting patiently for offers

which hardly ever came. Around one of the Formica-topped tables near the red plush walls sat a number of Greek shipmen from the freight ship, the "Iliad" which lay moored in the harbor, between the old and new river bridges. And here and there, infiltrating the vacant places, were students, office workers, a hustler or two, a stag woman, a haggard old wino who kept begging drinks, a has-been prostitute trying to make it with a young sailor, who kept saying drunkenly: "Will you screw me please!" and a girl costumed grotesquely in a rakish attempt at looking "way out," one of the flower children; her Cleopatra eyes surveying the dark dungeon of a bar with serpentlike stares, her broomstraw hair like a shroud down the sides of her milky-white face, her too-plump neck strung with worry beads, a badge with 69 written on it, lavender snake hose, and a paper flower she had snitched from McCory's Five and Ten.

Julie, a trim, blonde coquette who worked the bar, stood at the multi-colored jukebox, tapping her ringed fingers to the cadence of "Cheryl's Going Home," while Jesse, standing mutely in the center of the lounge, not knowing what to do exactly, now that he was in, and wishing desperately she would drop in the quarter she dangled over the slots and play the tune which had haunted him for days, summing up his world, his agonizing past: "Child of Clay."

Outside, motorcycles growled like demons out of

hell, flooding Third Street with a bombardment of hollow sounds. Memory from the previous night raked at Jesse's brain. Whirling round, as if jerked by invisible strings, he rushed back to the entrance, peered out the tiny glass window cut into the door. His Honda was still intact, parked like a gleaming red charger near the curb, its shiny red and silvery chrome trim glistening, picking up and reflecting wildly the multi-colored neon lights. It was still there, safe. It was the only thing he had of value in the world, a sixty-seven Honda paid for by the work and sweat of his brow and, because it was his, his alone, and because it was all he owned of any material value, it was to him the most precious possession in his life. In fact it was his life. And because of this proud ownership, because it gleamed so, like a forbidden coin of pure gold, because its eerie glisten, its gaudy dazzle reminded him so sharply of his own wretchedness by comparison, it became as a sword and shield to him, which he bore between him and the cruelty of the world, a weapon which he thrust out to others and cried, almost with bitterness and rebellion: "Don't touch it! It is mine!"

This cry of desperation he also allied with himself; his own handsome body cried it silently when cheap whores tried to paw him. He wanted none of them, their painted mouths, their limp, aged arms, their soiled and tainted bodies, the looseness of their sex . . . not since Jackie.

In his tortured heart and mind, though he did

not have the cunning nor the foresight to sense it then, he wanted no one but her, and everyone else's bodies, for their kisses, their shoddy love, he had no desire, and they were but vague, shadowy beings to him, compared to Jackie.

Jackie was like a rose growing in a field of torn and fragile weeds, as she was a woman compared to these filthy hags, a madonna face amid these haggard harridans of the streets.

The perfect madonna face, the child-woman, that men like him—men who dared to dream over the ages—would search for, tirelessly. To him she was the one face in a million faces, the only one with eyes and nose and mouth, the only one that breathed . . . that really, truly breathed. Jackie was life, while every other woman to him was made of dry, brittle chalk.

So, now, turning from the doorway, satisfied only momentarily that his most precious possession was safe, he moved through the blur of faces, faces drowned in the fogs of cigarette smoke.

As if one of the shadows himself, a shadow among shadows, he fumbled pretentiously in his jeans for the price of a beer. He wanted to sit down, to pretend he belonged, but without a drink on his table he knew he would look like a bum, or worse, a hustler. And, God! how he hated a hustler!

Mercifully, he came up with the sum of forty cents, and he ordered a drink. The waitress brought it over, a tiny, doll-like creature with black, high-

piled hair, obviously a lacquered wig, and shot him an insolent glance.

"Thanks, Dusty," he murmured, trying not to look at her, her immaculate sky-blue jersey, her skin-tight capris, her Japanese high heels. She was so clean, so fragile, he figured she would crack like china if he laid a finger on her. And this cleanliness intensified his own filth, his bruised and torn face, his utter privations.

He fumed silently over not having a cigarette between his lips. And more than a nicotine urge was a deep insatiable hunger which gnawed in his guts. He had not eaten for two days, though he had drunk like drink was going out of style, having run into two buddies out at a bar on Florida Avenue who had a fifth of gin, and had ended at the Riviera in Port Allen, his silvery pride and joy abandoned, lost to his new love, his luckily found drunkness.

He would never leave it again, he thought, musing, as he made circles on the table with his sweating beer glass. His motor was his status symbol, if he could call it that, and without it he was doomed.

A girl at the bar, who might have been pretty if she had kept her figure, which now was grotesquely plump, turned and eyed him repeatedly. Though he noticed her through his shades, he did not smile his honest, shy smile, even though she held up her glass and pointed, in indication that she was buying, for he did not want to appear as a hustler.

He glanced into the watery mirror of his beer,

hoping that he would see Jackie's reflection there in the golden depths, as she would always be reflected in his heart. He saw only emptiness. And he wondered forlornly where she might happen to be tonight, who she was with; was she laughing and happy, or sad and in tears?

He hoped she was happy. He loved her that much. Even if she was happy with someone else. No! God! he *couldn't* hope that. Fate did not intend that he be that unselfish. He cared for her too much to stand by while she was in the arms of another man, even if that other man made her happy, even if he, Jesse, was lost forever to her life, her love, her thoughts.

Got to get a job, he thought despairingly, stay sober, buy some better clothes, quit looking like a tramp. Maybe, maybe if he could pull out in time, get back on his feet, show her that he could stay sober, leave the honkytonks alone, then—then she might take him back.

A ratty, toothless punk sprawled down beside him.

"Buy me a drink, Jesse!"

"I'm broke."

"Ah, come on, man," the boy implored, lisping, the sound of his voice rolling through the deep hollow of his mouth and over his visible tongue, made by the absence of his teeth. "Didn't I see you at the Riviera last night, spending dough like you owned the First National? Don't tell me, man!"

"It all went down the shit-hole," Jesse grunted, and they both laughed. "Just like every red cent I can get my hands on . . . booze . . . booze . . . booze."

"You oughta put some back, under your mattress or something," the boy advised, giving him a hungry look. "Save something to feed your face."

"Look who's talking," said Jesse, taking his time on his beer. "I've seen you going around for days with your gut growling just because you blew your wad at some club or on some chick."

"Like you with that dago slut . . . what's her name?"

"Myrtle . . . you mean?" Jesse tried to be coy.

The boy chuckled.

"You know damn well she's who I mean. I hate them dagos with a fuckin' passion."

" 'Cause you're a dago yourself, eh, Rono?"

"I ain't no dago, Jesse. I'm Italian . . . south Italian."

"Alright! Alright!" Jesse cried back. He hated arguments.

The boy called Rono gave Jesse a sheepish look, then got down to business. He put both elbows on the table and leaned forward, as if he was participating in a conspiracy.

"What you got lined up for tonight, Jesse?"

Jesse gave him a cockeyed look, then glanced away in disgust.

"Nothing."

"I think I'll mosey over to the Boulevard," Rono said, trying to make it sound important. "Maybe I can score. Then, if I don't make out, I'll shag-ass it down to the Mirror Room. I can always pick up a five in there."

"Is that all you're worth?"

"I don't see you wearing diamond rings."

" 'Cause I don't hustle."

"Hell, Jesse, you have to hustle where the money is. And it's in the Boulevard or the Mirror Room or the Den out on Florida."

"You and your fucking friends."

"Well—er," he stammered. "It's better than starving."

"I'd rather starve."

"Okay," Rono replied, flinging his hands wide. "Go ahead and starve. Not me, daddyo! Not as long as I can sell my tail."

Jesse had no answer for that. He sat silently, staring at his thin fingers curled around his beer glass. He'd make it somehow, no matter how dim things seemed tonight. Hadn't he always made it, somehow?

"Down in the dumps, eh?" Rono asked, his expression thoughtful of someone else for a change, instead of always on himself.

"I'm on cloud nine," Jesse replied, still not looking up from his drink.

"Yeah, I bet," Rono ridiculed him, letting out a disbelieving chuckle. "I can hear your gut growling

from here. You'd give both your balls for a hot meal and a pack of cigarettes. Play it smart, man!"

"Go to hell!"

"Ah, come on, Jesse. Give yourself a break. Nobody's going to put you down for dropping your jeans. And nobody's going to pin a medal on you, either, for trying to be so straight. Just stand around one of them bars, and you'll get picked up."

"Knock off that shit, Rono. You 'bout to make me puke."

"You'd let a woman pick you up for money, and don't come up with some smart-ass shit that you wouldn't."

At that, Jesse turned and looked at him. "There's a hell of a lot of difference in going with a woman and . . . and this other rotten shit."

"It ain't no difference," Rono cried back in defense, his black eyes snapping. "You're selling your tail in either case. Sex in exchange for money."

"Well, maybe so," Jesse said, weary of this conversation. "But I'd damn sight rather make it with a woman than with one of your . . . your kind of friends."

"Well, I see I'm not getting anywhere with you," Rono cried. "I just hate to see you looking like a corpse, that's all. If you want to fall dead in the streets from starvation and let the state bury you, then that's your crummy business." He got up to leave. "Me, man, I'm shag-assing it to where the cabbage is."

"Don't slam the door on your way out," Jesse said. He didn't even look up, but kept staring at his drink.

"See you round," Rono replied, giving a slight wave.

Jesse nodded. He didn't have the heart to say good-bye. He just wanted to sit and mope, feel sorry for himself, he guessed, think about his past. This was a habit of his since his wife had quit him . . . to sit while he was sober, or sometimes when headed for a drunk, and take out all his precious memories of her, like a picture album, and thumb through them one by one, reliving them once more, dreaming that they might chance to happen again in reality.

We'll never make it again, ever, he thought to himself, as he halfheartedly watched a couple dancing, their close bodies only silhouettes against the scarlet wall. He and Jackie were through. And a jabbing pain stabbed itself through and into his tortured heart.

No! He would never be through with her, not really, though she wanted none of him. He would go on loving her, caring what she did, who she was with, worrying over her happiness or unhappiness . . . silently.

Sadly he ran his eyes over the busily occupied crowd which lined the bar, at Julie doling out drinks to a gang of roustabouts from the municipal docks, their work helmets shining like polished silver under

the red lights. Julie was tipsy already, and she was beginning to raise her voice, giving orders to the drunken men. Myrtle, the dago was trying to assist her.

Through the door which led into the poolroom Jesse could get a glimpse now and then of G-Joe, as he and some ratty-looking slut battled it out over a game, and with them lining the tables like guards were Buck and Kelsey and Sharkey and Catano and Mazzi and Cabaan and queer-looking Albert. He knew them all and the mere sight of their pale, ravished faces, like ghosts in foggy wisps of smoke, made him hate this lounge and everything this life entailed. He should be at home, with his wife and his son who still could be alive, comfortable, secure, happy; not here rubbing elbows with these punks.

He loathed this life, and it seemed that the more he hated it, the more he became involved in it, that the harder he tried to climb out of its eternal sewer the farther back he slipped, the deeper into all the rotten, frustrating degradation.

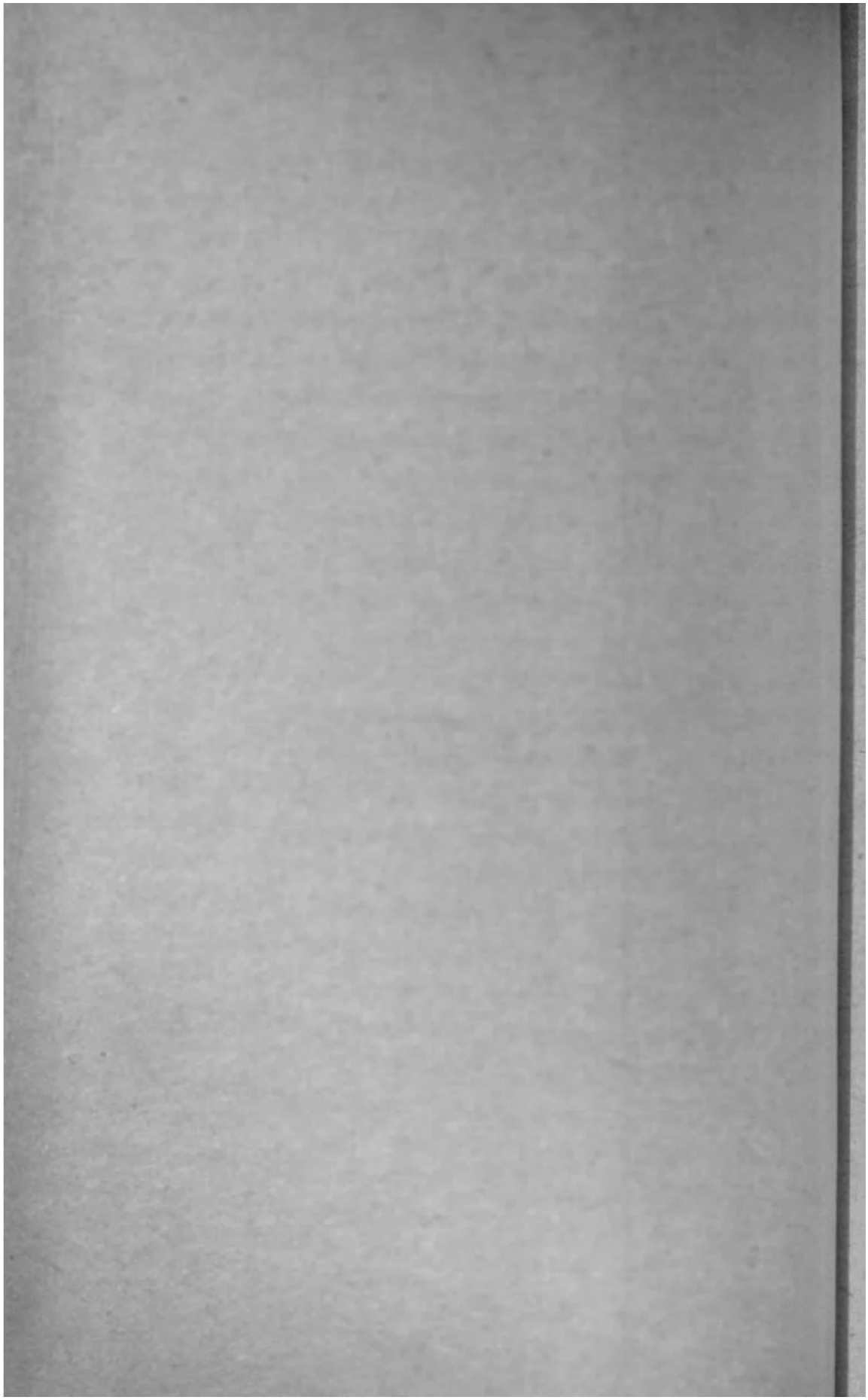
And it was so easy to keep slipping. Just take a drink, just one drink and he began to slide, going faster and faster until he fouled up again, got into some meaningless fight; ending up in jail, broke.

It was so easy to go down, especially when he was already halfway down, and the darkness was so intense he couldn't see the light.

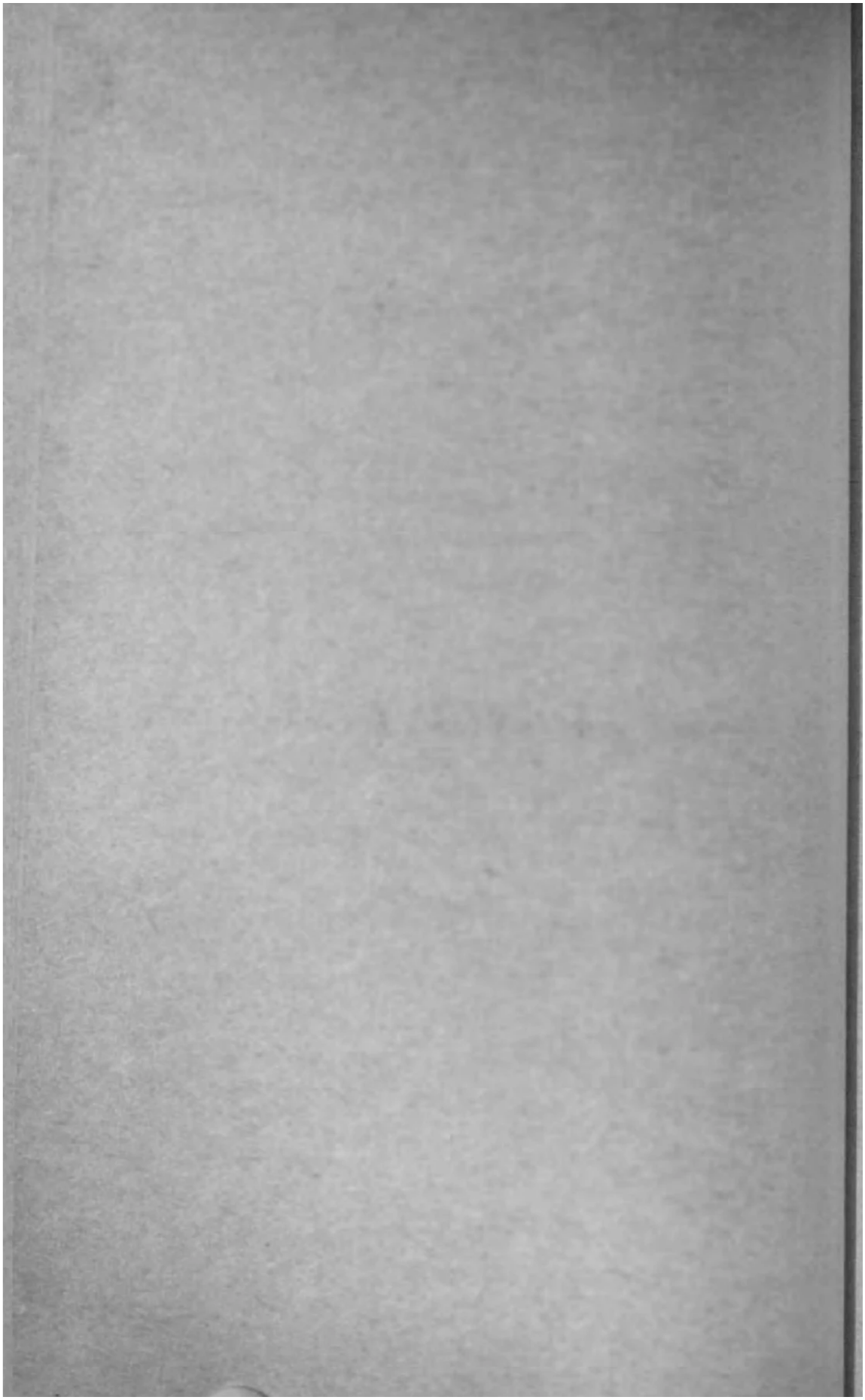
Someday though! Someday!

No use to stay here, he thought with an empty

weariness—here glued to this revolting atmosphere. And he gulped down the last remaining drops of his beer. It would be his all for the night. Might as well get up, go to his rat-hole of a room on Government, call it a day. There was no possible way for him to get any money tonight, and he did not believe in miracles. Miracles were for the saints and those who did not need miracles. He got up to go . . .



PART I



It was that same night, that hot August night of 1967 that I first met Jesse Lee Thames in Bruce's Lounge.

I was not accustomed to frequenting bars alone. My profession was that of an artist and interior decorator; it had taught me discretion, and I had my own standards which I added to those of American society, if you can call it a society. And my broken marriage had heaped upon me such an abundance of misery, unhappiness and mental torture that I had learned to "be careful with men."

Too, I dabbled in writing a little, mostly shoddy love stories, of which I was never very proud, wrote articles for some of the leading magazines on decorating, and had completed, after long effort, an

outline for a forthcoming novel. So, I considered myself established as a mature male of twenty-five and, being of an independent nature since childhood, I felt I could take care of myself, ready to erect that invisible wall when some attractive man got too close. And there were some attractive ones in this town. Not that I was on the prowl for attractive and available men. I wasn't. But I was normal and healthy, had a nice build.

That night, which I shall never forget, I was wearing my favorite color, canary yellow, a simple dress trimmed in white, yellow high heeled shoes and a yellow velvet head band which set off my pride and joy, my long flaxen hair. I had always taken especially good care of my hair, and I kept it a little longer than shoulder length, parted it in the middle, clipped bangs which made a nice curve an inch above my emerald eyes, and brushed it daily until the strands had the fine sheen of satin. I was never one to look too tailored, but I liked that clean scurbbed look. I always pitied guys who tried to look "too feminine," applying bows and lace and enormous flowers as a ruse to cover their masculinity.

When I felt like moving I moved. When I felt like relaxing I relaxed. When I experienced moments of delight I did giddy things. I never drove myself, nor did I ever concern myself with trifles. My failure in marriage had not hardened me, but it had matured me, and rendered from that calm

maturity I at last discovered the secret to living. Play it cool. Or, from my aunt's favorite Bible quotation: "Be moderate in all things." I had learned to be moderate. I was a great success at my vocation, which aided my sense of balance and security; and failure with one man had, to a degree, fortified my heart against any risk with another. I would give less. Therefore I would receive more.

It is better to stay on top with love and never let yourself go under. Once under it is harder to come up again. I would swim in the lake of love in the future but I would never risk deep water. I would take it stroke by stroke. I would see the opposite shore, and I would know that I could swim to the other side. No chance-taking. Never again would I plunge headlong into wild and whirling waters, the opposite bank too foggy for my sense of perception to detect.

I was that careful, and that considered in my emotions.

Until I met Jesse.

As if by the hand of fate, I turned off Government Street that night onto Third Street with the casual air of one heading into mid-city to pick up a newspaper. As I turned the corner, I happened to notice that the drugstore was still open and the front window displayed an array of porcelain statues. In that fleeting moment I noticed the larger one, which centered the window, and recognized it as "The Rape of the Sabine Women." I had quite a collec-

tion of statues and Italian glass and I had already considered in my mind's eye how it would look centered on my black marble boomerang coffee table. Instinctively I searched for a parking place and luckily found one.

I made several attempts at trying to park my canary yellow Thunderbird convertible, all of them miserable failures. So I pulled it into the curb, jumped out hurriedly in hopes of finding some kind gentleman who would park it for me while I ran into the drugstore for the statue. I stood for a brief moment on the sidewalk and looked for a considerate gentleman. I noticed too that I was standing in front of a lounge, and that behind the car next to mine stood a beautiful motorcycle. It gleamed like a new pistol, its silvery chrome reflecting the overhead neon lights of the lounge, and fleetingly I wondered who might be its owner.

These marvelous contraptions, ignited with super-charges of power, of thrill, adventure; although fascinating to me, were—secretly—less glamorous to me than their pilots. Men who loved the out of doors, speed . . . the kind of man I hoped to love.

All this I saw and felt in a fleeting glance. I still had to get my car parked and buy that statue. I glanced up and down the street. A young couple came by, eyed me curiously. An old man, staggering, went by in a wreath of whiskey smells, and with a great effort said: "Yep . . . hi yo, *lady*." And

a teenage boy, alone, wandering, his hands thrust in his tight jeans pockets.

I decided to go into the lounge.

I opened the door reluctantly, peered into the crimson darkness, a little fearful, uneasy now that I had taken the plunge.

Someone let out a wolf whistle.

I started to back out of the place.

"Come on in, *lady*," a coarse voice invited from the cave of menacing dimness, "we're not going to eat you alive."

"No . . . but I'd like to," croaked another with a thick, drunken tongue.

I was really cautious now, as my curious eyes scanned the bleak interior, seeing the forms of crude men lining the bar, the frivolous-looking *girls* laden with gaudy makeup, the laborers in work helmets, younger men in college attire, degenerate-looking boys in tight T-shirts and levis, their unruly hair in their fiery eyes, ogling me like they had never seen a queen before. Then my gaze fell on a tall, dark man rising from a table where he had been sitting alone. Though I could not make out his features readily, he appeared pleasant enough, imposing to say the least, and I moved slowly into the lounge and to where he stood.

"Were you leaving anyway?" I asked, my voice a little shaky, for I knew that every eye in this lounge was glued to my every move.

"Yes, I was," he answered politely, holding firmly

to the back of his chair. I seemed to feel his physical presence, a glowing warmth rare even among the few who possessed enormous capacities for passion, and to most people never known in their lifetimes. And this sudden warmth was magnetic, drawing me like invisible threads.

"Can I help you?"

"I can't park my car," I stammered like a ninny. "Would you be so kind?"

"Sure," he replied, and I handed him the keys.

I followed him outside, through the maze of burning eyes, catcalls, whistles, and watched with amazement as he got behind the wheel and parked it neatly in what was a matter of seconds, handling my car as if he had driven it all his life.

"How's that?" he asked, as he climbed out of the car and returned me my keys, our fingers touching. I noticed his then, how long, how tapering, how firm.

"Perfect," I exclaimed, and this seemed to please him for he smiled a shy smile, his pale eyes lighting quickly like a young kid after doing a good deed.

We stood looking at each other then, almost hypnotic.

"Is that all?" he asked finally, low of voice, as if reluctant to part.

"Well," I caught myself saying, "I was going to the drugstore to make a purchase. You've been so kind that when I'm through there I'd like to buy you a drink."

"You don't owe me anything for that," he said, his voice breaking off abruptly.

Our eyes met and held.

"But I want to," I said.

He shrugged again, smiled a friendly, warm smile which won me to him completely.

"Can I tag along to the drugstore with you?"

"Why not?" I laughed, and I paid no attention to the seedy way he was dressed. Somehow it made no difference, though he was in a soiled, disheveled condition compared to my appearance, the clean, wholesome beauty I realized I possessed. I saw, or felt that I saw, something clean and wholesome beneath his rags, a fine body and a fine mind, both keen, animal alert, the things I admired and looked for in men. Too, he was all man, male to his long fingertips, utterly masculine with every gesture he made, every movement, however slight. He was like a beautiful animal taken into bondage, not quite belonging to these dirty, concrete streets, and I could tell that that search for the wilds was still in him . . . his desperation to be set free . . . for his movements and gestures were held in check, his manner and speech reined in tightly against the wild tide of his emotions, as if at any given moment he would leap free, and bound away into his dark, primitive alleyways.

"My name is Jesse Lee Thames," he said, introducing himself while we waited for the clerk to pack the enormous white statue into a cardboard

box. "What's yours?"

"Robert Lily," I answered, with an attempt at making it sound as dramatic as I could.

"Sounds like a movie star's name," he said, the light in his lowered eyes deeply curious, flaming with interest, which made me a little nervous.

"Not hardly," I remarked, while I rummaged in my handbag for the proper change. "I'm an artist, and a writer, of sorts."

His eyes lit up even more brightly at that.

"Maybe you can paint me someday, Mr. Lily."

"Just call me Lily, Jesse," I replied, and I meant this. I loathed formalities, and I sensed he did too. The natural way was his way, as it was mine.

Like a handy boy scout, he carried my statue for me, put it into the rear of the car, and we went into Bruce's for a drink. The table he had previously occupied was still vacant, so we sat there, our faces and shoulders illuminated by the tiny wall light glowing down from the dark, blood-red wall.

He looked rather uncomfortable when I asked him what he wanted to drink.

"You might as well know the truth right now, Lily. I'm broke."

"It doesn't matter if you are broke, Jesse," I said, trying to put him at ease. "I invited you in for a drink, and I want to pay, whether I buy one or fifty."

He tried to smother a grin. "I'll have a C C and Coke then."

I ordered a creme de menthe for myself and the drink he had chosen for himself. We waited quietly until the girl brought them to our table, a dark haired dago who kept giving him side-long glances he was reluctant to return. I wanted to shout to her: "Hands off!" Actually, I had no claims on him whatsoever, and maybe she didn't, but I had my bid in anyway.

"Thanks, Myrtle," he said to her as he carefully placed his drink on a napkin, gave it a couple of stirs.

Before she returned to the bar she paused deliberately, gave me careful scrutiny, both hands on her hips, the hips of a wash woman, her black eyes snapping like a wild cat's. I returned her gaze until she got cold feet and left.

"That's Myrtle," Jesse explained, after a minute's silence.

"So I gathered," I said, but a little too quickly.

"She works here," he said, as if to explain about himself and her. "I don't know her really. Just see her when she comes in here."

"It doesn't matter, Jesse," I said faintly, pretending a nonchalance I did not feel. "You don't have to explain about her, or anyone you know for that matter."

"Well . . . ah . . . I just didn't want you to think I went with . . . with bar girls."

"Why? Aren't bar girls nice?"

He looked up quickly from his drink, which he

had already half consumed, and his eyes were as startled as a hawk's.

"I don't go out with girls . . . not since me and my old lady broke up."

I lifted an eyebrow. So, Jesse and I were in the same boat. I asked him then about his marriage, not mainly to make conversation, but because I had become interested in him, his life, his dreams, his ambitions.

"I was happy with her once," he began, as if he were reciting a school play he had memorized over and over. "We did everything together, me and Jackie. Went dancing, shot pool, loved to go riding in our car. We had a new one then, but I wrecked it one night . . . drunk." He dropped his eyes. "When our boy came we had everything then, a house, furniture, a car, and with his coming we had everything we could ever want. But when he went, nothing was right after that . . . nothing."

"I'm sorry," I murmured, my heart feeling the edge of his loss.

"He was Jackie's whole world. And when he died he took everything with him, even our love for each other, I guess. Things were never the same then, not after our baby. We tried, tried three times in fact, but it wouldn't work out. So, I started drinking, and it just got worse and worse . . . finally." He paused, sucked in his breath. "Finally, she left me."

I saw, felt strongly that it was all coming back to haunt him anew, and I tried vainly to think of

something comforting to say.

"It's a pity you didn't try to have another child. Maybe that would have filled up the gap."

"Naw," he said hoarsely, shaking his head until his black hair fell in ringlets over his saddened eyes. "Jackie never wanted another one. And I was about as bad. We just felt that another baby wouldn't ever be the same . . . the same as the one we lost."

I was at a loss now.

"But many parents have lost their children, Jesse, and have gone on to have other ones. What about the parents of the boys killed in Vietnam? Their children were grown young men, and that made their death even harder on the parents, for they had loved them all those years, while you had loved yours only a few short months."

"I don't understand how they are bearing it," he said softly. "I don't understand how they can go on and live, day after day, knowing they'll never see them again."

I knew then, understood and felt keenly his great potential for compassion, love. He was richly endowed with it, and the loss of his son was bringing that fine quality out in him, lifting it to the surface of his being, making him all the more noble, wondrous. He was possessed of great heart, affection, and he was not too proud to show these emotions in my presence—to my understanding. And because he was displaying them before me, like lifting a bandage to display a wound, it did not make him

less manly in my eyes, but more so. The more masculine the man, the more tender his nature, and this man seated opposite me was the essence of these noble qualities.

At this moment, though Jesse was to me a total stranger, I felt that through his words about his life, the very sound of his voice, he was taking me by the hand and leading me into his world, into his thought; showing me his beliefs, his very heart. I wondered if I knew him so much now, knew his feelings, his emotions as he had experienced them so deeply, his great and his little faults, then how much more could I know of him, influenced by his passions, his physical nearness.

I harbored no whims about virginity. I had had sex with lots of guys and had loved it at times . . . but only at times. He had never provoked in me the feelings this Jesse was arousing. He had never stirred me with his body naked on mine, working out frantically the bold urgings of sex, as the tremor in Jesse's voice stirred me, the haunting way he looked at me, his recklessness, the radiation of his warmth and understanding which could shake me, snatch me to him with the glint of an eye, a grin . . . even a faint whisper.

As I sat there listening to him talk about his life, I began to study him physically, to gauge him as a man in comparison to his mental and compassionate capabilities. I began to watch the way the big veins crawled up his sinewy arms, how the smooth,

dark skin lay so firmly over the muscle and bone, the power, the ferocity they conveyed by each slight move, the way his broad shoulders loomed in the semi-darkness, the fine hair which showed on his chest where he had carelessly left his shirt unbuttoned, the savagery about his features which, miraculously blended with his spontaneous warmth, the glowing quality of him as a man, and even more as a person.

Why he should arouse in me this errant response, I could not fathom. The men I usually kept company with were elegantly dressed, mannerly to a fault, educated, debonaire, suave; men who could discuss clothes, wines, art, events of the world, travel, war, politics, music, books. Yet, Jesse seemed to have all these qualifications too or, if he did not have them, it seemed the less important to me that he did not seem to be lacking in worldly knowledge–not that knowledge which can be learned from books, but comes from life.

What he was thrilled and fascinated me. And I found myself not only wanting to know him, but to have him, to belong to him, his life. I had not known I was so desperately lonely until I met him this lovely night. I had forgotten how drab, how utterly sterile and mute my existence had become until I saw Jesse smile. Now knowing, I did not want to go back to my old world, my old life. I longed to take up a new life with him, to make him happy where his wife had not, to take out all the lonely

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places and fill them with love . . . my love.

Now with this handsome stranger I felt alive.

I felt alive for the first time in many months. Felt meaningful, as if I belonged. No man had ever made me feel like that! With all their beguiling chattering, their bridling, their sidling, their proposals, their maneuvers to win me, they were as nothing compared to this man's radiant warmth, and the strange thing about it all was that he wasn't putting out any effort to win me. He was merely being himself and without that usual come-on which a man employs on a first meeting. He had made no flattering remarks to me, had offered no comments as to my physical person, and yet, there was a wayward force about him, about his manner, that held and awed me, and fascinated me completely.

Noticing that he had completely drained his glass, I ordered another round of drinks, ignoring his protests.

"Lily! I can't let a friend buy me drinks. These people in here will take me for a hustler."

I gave him a devil-may-care wink.

"Do you really care what these people in here think?"

He shrugged, gave me an absent gaze.

"I guess I don't. But to me hustler is a naughty word."

I smiled at his use of the word "naughty," as if, I imagined, he were selecting his words carefully to please me, and I felt basically flattered that he

considered me at all.

"Hustler is naughty if it is used incorrectly," I tried to explain. "We all hustle, Jesse, one way or another. The worker hustles on his job in order to get ahead. The starlet caters to the director to get meaty parts in a show. In a manner I'm hustling you, enticing you to drink because I am enjoying your company."

This seemed to take him by complete surprise for, when the dago girl, Myrtle, had brought our drinks and left, he turned to me with an attractive glint in his eyes, his ready smile so broad, his dimples displayed themselves alluringly.

"You . . . *you* . . . enjoying *my* company!"

"I find you most interesting," I said, and I meant this profoundly.

"I'm not much to talk to," he said, stirring his drink, and for the first time I noticed that the knuckles on his right hand were skinned badly but the sight did not alarm me. Many men had nicked hands through the course of hard manual labor. "I don't keep the company of queens much, Lily. Oh, I talk to a lot of them, but that's all it is—talk. Every time I think I'm getting interested I start thinking of my wife, then I lose all interest in them . . . in everything."

"Are you interested in me?" I blurted out, then on second thought added. "Or is that a fair question."

He smiled in a way that was maddening.

"I think it's a fair question." He thought for a moment. "You certainly are a fine-looking guy, and you're smart, got a head on your shoulders. Not like these other gays. I enjoy talking to you."

I knew instinctively that he was speaking the truth. A liar lets you know he thinks you're a fool for believing him, but a man who tells the truth does not have to take that into consideration. Jesse was merely being frank. I couldn't expect more. Later when . . . or if . . . I got to know him better, if I could make him care for me, then I would expect more. But now, this night, even though my ambitious brain was ticking, calculating, making delightful plans, I could expect no more from him than from anyone else I had known but a few happy hours. I realized the while that I was too aggressive. But I knew, and had always known, what I wanted, especially in people. And I wanted Jesse!

I wanted him without the usual reasons a man wants a man. I wanted love for the sake of love, to bask in it for its thrill, the wonderful meaning it held for me and the man who made love to me. So through this want, if not admitted to anyone else other than to myself, I posed an all-important question:

"Jesse," I said, not knowing actually where and how to begin, "I hope you don't regard me as being nosy, prying into your affairs. But since you do interest me a great deal . . . what about your livelihood? I mean, how do you make a living . . . money

to pay for your drinks, things like that? You must have some visible means of support."

He was not offended in any way by my questions. He answered me readily.

"Well, I do construction work, been down at Donaldsonville for awhile, until the work played out. Am a pipe fitter too, and I have done sheet welding."

"But I mean now, presently?"

He shrugged, a habit of his, studied the bubbles on his drink.

"Just loafing, Lily, to tell you the truth. No use pretending I'm working at a job when I'm not. It's not that I'm lazy, actually." He held out one hand, used it dramatically to help express himself. "I know you don't understand, not a guy like you. You don't know the kind of life I lead, the things I do, the rut I'm in."

"Maybe I do," I reassured him, taking out my cigarettes and offering him one. I noticed that he took it almost greedily, as if it were oxygen to his lungs. "I've been around a little. And I've read a lot."

He laughed, and his quick merriment made him all the more fascinating to me, for it was a spontaneous laugh, filled to the brim with the emotions he felt, and not merely surface emotion.

"You can't find my life in any books, Lily. They don't write them that rough."

"You think not? I've read some rather 'rough' ones

as you call it. Who knows, I may write your life story someday?"

This pleased him immensely.

"You're kidding, Lily."

"No I'm not. That is," and I played my trump card, "that is if I get to know you better, find out about the side to your life I don't know—the things you do, the way you feel about things. You strike me as a colorful character, the hero type, the ready-made hero, not the stereotyped variety of so many novels about the South."

"I'm dull as mud, Lily," he grunted, flipping the ashes off his cigarette and returning it to his lips . . . soft, warm lips I imagined, which curved over the roundness of the cigarette. Smoke curled upward to frame his dark face in a cloud of pale blue. "I pick up a dollar here and there. Have a few friends who fork out a hot meal now and then. It's a lazy, shiftless kind of life, one you've never known, I'm certain. I just do what comes along at the time, a cup of coffee in the morning, a game or two of pool, if I'm lucky, go to the wrestling matches, once in a while to a show, if its loaded with girls, like them Flint movies, a beer now and then, then when I get fed up loafing I go to work for a week or two." He whirled round to eye me steadily, seriously, as if fearful of how I would take what he was about to say. "Then I blow it all on booze out at one of them clip joints in Port Allen."

"No responsibility?" I cried, urging him on.

"It's not that, Lily. You don't understand. I could be responsible once, honest. When a guy loses everything, his wife, his baby, he can't help but flip. I'll pull out someday. You just watch me, Lily."

"Hope I'm around to find out," I said truthfully.

"Ah, you wouldn't want to do that, Lily. You'd be bored to death. Why would a purty guy like you want to follow around with a bum like me?"

"You're not a bum, Jesse."

"Sometimes I think I'm one."

"You've just had a few hard knocks all at once. But I see a lot of good in you, the way you speak about your wife, your baby. There must be an awful lot of good in a man who could love a child so. Just because you're not so well-dressed as you should be, or could be, is no indication that you're a tramp. I see fine things beneath those clothes, Jesse, a fine, healthy body. And you do keep strong and healthy amazingly for the kind of life you lead, no proper diet, rarely three good meals a day. You're a good man, Jesse, and I feel this."

"Good," he grunted, bowing his head so low that his face seemed covered by his dangling curls of black hair. "You don't really know me, Lily. How could you, just meeting me tonight? I get into fights all the time. Just look at me." He lifted his shades, revealing dark bruises, cuts around and about his eyes. "I don't heal up in one place before another place has gotten it."

"You must heal beautifully then," I said, "which

is an indication of your powerful, good health."

"I'm part Indian," he declared with enormous pride. "We just heal quick somehow. But who cares? Nobody gives a damn—I mean darn—whether I heal or not."

I gazed at him with serious intent. I longed to be close to him, to belong near him but I was reluctant somehow.

"People care, Jesse, probably more than you think. It's just that everything, everyone, is in such a big hurry these days. No one stops long enough to analyze himself or appreciate the fine qualities in others. Everything is taken for granted, and I never *did* like that. I *like* to care about things, about people, and I like to tell them I like them. There is no use keeping it a secret. I think by their knowing, in turn they will like me more."

"I'm that way too," he said, his eyes filled with gaiety. "My sisters say I have a heart, and that's why they love me so much. They know I am honest inside, true."

I loved this about him then, and as we sat there, bathed in the dim scarlet of the wall lamp, immune to the raffish clientele in this seedy lounge, as if we two had floated free of all mortal connection, I could not drag my eyes from him. I realized this was a peculiar and a newly discovered fixation within myself. The jukebox was adrift too, well into "By the Time I Get to Phoenix," and its sad, haunting, almost ghostly wraith of what my own life had

been. It laved the dimness with sound, which rolled over us like an enormous wave. We sat silently and listened; he intently, his every sense keyed to the melancholy sounds, as he drew lazily on his cigarette . . . and how interestingly he could do this . . . the current of the music drawing us into its singular possession like a spell from which we could not stir. When it was over and the rush of silence struck us with sharp contrast, he lifted his cigarette to his lips very slowly, curling it between his long, naked fingers . . . fingers I thought would look so beautiful adorned with golden rings, and took one long, lazy draw, then snuffed it out in the grimy ashtray.

"I'm in about the same fix as that guy," he said in a sad voice, motioning with a tilt of his head toward the jukebox. "Lost my woman."

That one phrase grabbed at my heart with painful constriction. I was already jealous of "that woman" though I had not one iota of right. But something in me burned for him, crazily, a haunting wanting, a desire I could not shake off, even though I had met him only this night. It was not a case of love at first sight. I was too optimistic for that. It was something much deeper, almost as absolute as death.

"Everytime I hear that song," he went on dreamily, "I want to bawl like a kid. I don't know why, but I just can't help it." He glanced up at me then, smiled that wayward smile that made me

tremble to my pixie toes, his eyes glinting tiny ligh
of silver behind their fans of long black lashes. "Bu
you wouldn't know about tears or unhappines
would you, Lily?"

"You want to bet?" I asked directly, my voic
firm. "I'm the victim of a broken marriage too
Jesse."

"That's hard to believe," he said, his eyes curiou
on mine.

"Why do you say its so hard to believe?"

"A guy like you." His eyes glittered even more
then, and bored recklessly into mine . . . deep with
searching, longing. "You're the kind of guy, Lily
who will always be happy. I bet men eat out of
your hand. You know how to live, how to make
men want you."

My pulse began to beat harder, faster. I longed
to ask him if he, too, wanted me as other men did
but I did not dare. Queens—wise ones—do not ask
men that question.

"I know one man who didn't eat out of my hand,"
I said instead.

"Did he treat you badly? If he did, I'd like to
beat hell—er—heck out of him."

I became elated at this remark, and felt pro-
foundly that I did belong, that this protective sense
he felt for me insured this belief.

Then I said factually: "He didn't beat me, if that's
what you mean?"

"Just mean then . . . that go-to-hell-mean?"

"No, he wasn't mean," I answered, every nerve tingling because he was taking an interest in me, in my own life. "He just wasn't reponsible. My husband was the kind of man, Jesse, who did not care a hoot about money. Nice looking, fairly well-built, dressed well, could be that perfect gentleman, but responsibility? He didn't know the meaning of the word. He'd as soon spend his payday in a bar and not have a red cent left on Monday morning as he would splurge on an extra, pound box of candy for me. He just didn't care. He didn't care if we had groceries or not, if the apartment rent was paid or not, the car notes, cleaning bills, what have you . . . nothing. He was a wonderful guy to go out on the town with, treated me like I was queen of the May, but for a husband . . . he was *lousy.*"

"Sounds a lot like me," Jesse said, and he looked at me from the top of his eyes. "I ain't no good, Lily."

Looking at him, I thought different.

"You are good, Jesse, because you have a heart, which my husband didn't. There wasn't an ounce of love in him, not just for me, but for anyone. Oh . . . I suppose he cared as much for me as he did anyone. But he just didn't care about people . . . except how he could use them and get everything he could out of them. He was such a poor lover." I gave him a fixed, eager look. "In or out of bed."

This brought an instantaneous smile from his soft, fleshy lips, a smile so broad his dimples sank in an

inch, and his teeth glowed in the sifted red light.

"I have never had any trouble or complaint along that line," he said.

He didn't have to tell me that. I could read tha in him. And I sensed, without shame, what he woul be like in bed. I knew fully how he could take me subdue me completely, thrill me, all while he wa enjoying himself . . . and how he could enjoy it And he would do this by giving all to me, not merely taking, ruthlessly, coldly, deliberately, basely. I could see and feel this in the animalism of his movements, the slow, languid manner in which he lifted his heavily veined arms, the exciting movement of his legs, the physical ardour he provoked, the way he could charm me by his tantalizing gaze, making me feel naked, the hot, pulsing aura of his obvious maleness, that maleness lodged in his loins which queens dared to dart glances at when they judged he was not aware of their eyes.

"I gather that you've had many guys," I made an attempt at conversation, for I expected he expected me to say something in this vein.

"Na," he answered, hanging his head as if I had tapped a shameful subject. "Not since my wife, no one—honest—no one."

This caused me to want him, now, even more desperately. To know that he had not gone to bed with any man since his wife, that he had remained faithful to her, even though she had left him, made him in my eyes and heart all the more the gallant

male. Especially when I considered my own husband, in comparison to Jesse, him and his long nightmare of women. And I knew about this dark, handsome stranger seated so close to me, knew absolutely, that he was a better man by far than ever my husband had been to me, and most assuredly a better man than anything that had ever, or would ever patronize this lounge.

I knew from experience with my husband that it took a powerful man to do without sex, any form of sex, once he had mated, had delighted in that mating. This sort of reserve took courage, endurance, patience, stamina, and a great obstinacy to shrug off temptation . . . especially the temptation of the gaudy men who came into this bar . . . who, like myself, found him sexually attractive and wanted him; longed, as I did, to feel his strong, fierce body against mine, pumping into me the wild ecstasy of my dreams, my wistful and premeditated desires, filling my loneliness with his wanton body, his coarseness, his utterly dark and provocative maleness.

For man, instinctively, is not asexual. Usually, he will stray even when deeply in love. It is a rare male indeed . . . and how well I should know this . . . who will remain faithful to one sex, especially in a land teeming with sex, when everything, from the selling of pink underwear to selling cars boldly employs both over- and undertones of sex, of fornication. And I knew now, and with such an inward

pouring of gladness, that Jesse was this rarity in a time when rarity in the male species is the most precious premium in their masculine world. Most men, as I had known them, were common, all of them bearing upon themselves the unmistakable brand which stamped them all.

Jesse!

How that very name would come to bewitch me in the wild and glorious . . . haunted and desperate . . . times to follow.

And added to this rarity, I concluded with an enormous outpouring of admiration for him, how doubly difficult it was for this man who lived from the streets. And looking around this variegated lounge, its shabbiness, at the motley girls, twisting their behinds for the benefit of the helmeted dock-hands; pawing, nudging them with their voluptuous breasts, their legs exposed by their shimmering mini-skirts, wanton eyes playing recklessly with male eyes burning with desire . . . I applied Jesse's animal body, his hungers to these women, and women he would chance to meet in the future, luring him into sex, and with all his deep and gallant love for his wife, his deep and insatiable hungers for her, refusing them as if they were offering mere bread. No man, and especially a man of such physical potential, could rebuke such carnal offers . . . for the male is always ready . . . unless he loved his wife to distraction. And I had a wild notion that, if he could love her so much, could be so loyal,

so faithful with his heart and his body, then perhaps . . . and this was my wild dream . . . perhaps I could in time win him as my own. Not in the usual cruel way in which queens employ their guile in winning men of their choice, but to win him through an outpouring of kindness, belief in his motives, sympathy for his present predicament, faith in his future. I would win him unselfishly; guiding in kindness and wisdom. And with these magic tools I might, if I was lucky, win his heart and his body and his love.

A grand, but unwary ambition for a person of my reserve, a plot of bold dimension by my strict standards, my correct deportment, but I was a lonely guy, perhaps without confessing that I was lonely until tonight. Now, Jesse made all the difference. He showed me how utterly lonely I was. He was the ignition to the upsurge of my emotions, the fire in my summer's wine, the life in my dread and desolation.

The jukebox was in the mournful throes of "Yesterday" now, and my emotions were keyed to the record. This was a new beginning for me, as I hoped it would be for him. A plan, a reason for things, a plot for my own happiness, even though I had not consulted this handsome, beguiling man to know if he was willing to follow suit. Somehow, so desperate were my needs, my new want for him, I did not consider if he would compromise or not. Nor did I consider the consequences, the life I would

in turn sacrifice for his sake. If I had known, as I know now in this tragic telling, I should still have accepted the challenge.

As I look back on it now in mournful reprise, I realize it was all worth it, his body, the manner in which he made love to me, the ferocity of his physical being, the power of his personality over mine, regardless of all that I endured because of him, the nightmares, the tragedy, the awesome ending.

I know now that I still would have endured the tragedy in order to bask in the glory of the other.

I would have because I am a true fag, and this is the acid test of homosexuality . . . the supreme test of ultimate love: what you are willing to sacrifice for that lover. And I was willing to sacrifice, to give up anything for Jesse . . . except him. I could not give him up.

It is men who should know these things. Jesse should have forced into me, through his own waywardness, the feelings I harbored for him. He should have shaken me out of my loneliness, should have brought me to life with his bold lips on mine, his thighs against my thighs, should have awakened me to my ready conclusions, but so far he had done none of these wild and alluring things. He had only played it straight, and had done it with such cleverness, such torturing excitement with his telltale glances, his incorruptible smiles, his shy boyishness, and all the time, as he had talked, while the sad

music had played, while our drinks had fortified us, he had keyed me, my body, my desires, to be in tune with his special brand of madness, his provocative allure.

He had become a sort of grand and intoxicating tarantella and I was dancing to the wild and fantastic rhythm of it, whirling my own mind out of realism and into his own savage dark world, drunken now on his physical beauty, impaled on the tragic darkness of him staring at me from across the table, hypnotized by the reckless way his shiny black hair fell into his wanton eyes.

Other queens may or may not have considered him a tramp, a hustler of the streets, a boy whose lack of scruples had allowed him passage through many dark doors and into many beds. But I had held the magnifying glass of my heart, my mind before him, had seen all those wonderful and beautiful things about him that other queers, I hoped, were too thoughtless, too careless to notice.

But I had noticed. I had discovered. And I wanted what I had found.

"Moon River" was pouring its magic gold over the lounge, filling the night world with adventure and intrigue. Bold now from drink, and the intoxication of him, his warm presence, I asked the too-obvious question.

"Jesse, do you have a place to stay, decent, I mean?"

He lifted an eyebrow. Other men I knew would

have jumped out of their seats.

"A hole in the wall over on Government," h answered, and a dark gleam in his eyes picture the place, reflected its grim walls, its drab furnish ings, its cold, filthy desolation.

"That you call home?" I questioned, withou ridicule. I could never say or do anything to woun his gentleness.

"More like the death cell," he murmured, flicker ing his eyelids. "Good enough for me, I reckon. I'v become nothing but a bum. So I guess I don't de serve better."

I began to choke up. If he refused my invitatio to come to my apartment for the night I would faint For me, this was the crucial moment. If he wen with me all would be fine. I knew this, for he wa a real man and I was a genuine homo. But if h refused, then this would be my last chance. I woul never have the heart nor courage to ask him again

"Jesse," I began, fumbling for words, hopeful c sounding blasé, casual, but knew I could not. Ever beat of my heart was coming up through my throa to sound in my throbbing voice.

"Don't think me a brazen bitch, but why don' you come to my place . . . tonight anyway . . see my paintings, do something different for change? It'll do you good."

"I'd like that," he replied, his face grim, certai in the red sprays of light. "But won't I embarras you, Lily? I'm not dressed to go anywhere, you know

that."

"You look fine," I said, and with meaning. "But you should get away from all this, if but for a little while. It's depressing you. You need color, cleanliness, a different environment."

"But to *your* apartment," he cried, defiant, as if I was offering him the Hotel Astor. "Wouldn't people think you were a . . . a . . . bringing a man in?"

I tried to laugh a brave laugh at that, but it was a quivering, bitter laugh.

"Well, I don't think the governor will evict me if I invite you," I said in cool protest.

He laughed. And his laughter made me tremble. My knees shook. I was afraid he was going to refuse, and if he refused, in his eyes I would look no better than the *girls* in this bar. He laughed again, and he was so maddeningly attractive when he laughed, a sound you loved to keep on hearing, like a wonderful piece of music you never tire of playing.

"You know I'll go, Lily," he said then, with finality, and I fell back in my chair in relief, though I tried not to be so obvious about my delight in his presence. My legs began to tremble so that I could hardly stand as I attempted to get up. He caught me politely by the arm and assisted me. Then, without delay, he escorted me down the length of the dark bar, as if he were as anxious as I.

Outside, he pointed to the shiny motorcycle.

"I'll follow behind you. You just lead the way."
I nodded.

Now, instinctively, I linked the two together, saw with what magnificence they fit as one, as if they were made for each other, both hard as steel, dark and gleaming, geared for fire and guts and deathless flippant darings. Counterparts, the heavy veins in his arms . . . and in his legs too I was positive . . . blending with the glistening wires which ran from battery to ignition to engine, both with a skeleton of iron, both ferocious, strutted with muscles of fibre and chrome, both shiny as a sculptured statue waiting for the gods to breathe into them the nebulous fumes of life.

I saw that the man was perfect for the machine, as the machine was perfect for the man. Both the ultimate in creative design, flawless, as the man must be to survive this glorious shining vehicle; as the vehicle must be to function, perfectly for the man. Together, they formed a phenomenon unequaled.

Here was brawn and muscle and steel interlocked. And I beheld this fact with avid clarity as he lifted one powerful leg, straddled it, and stepped down hard on the pedal which awakened it in a roaring crescendo. They fit, like a knight in silvery armor on a black stallion, like a naked warrior on a pinto pony, like a matador and a raging bull. And how was I to know, or even dream of such an awesome ending, as I stood there under the bright neon

lights admiring the two together, that both of them in the immediate future would be smeared with mud and blood, and would scream their way through my tortured heart on and on to their tragic ending?

I did not know. Nor was there anyone to tell me, not fate, not even God!

My apartment was located at the far end of Lafayette Street, facing the bluff and the Mississippi River. We had but a short distance to go, and I watched him through my rearview mirror as he trailed me, his powerful, sinewy body swaying as the dazzling machine swayed, and I was thrilled to the marrow of my bones that he was following me . . . ME . . . Robert Lily . . . who had somehow forgotten how to want a man, to be loved by a man. This dark, roving-eyed Jesse Lee Thames was following me, to make love to me, to give himself to me, his body, his sex hunger, his loneliness.

My apartment sat behind a mortar wall very much like the apartments in the French Quarter in New Orleans, approached by way of a hinged double gate of wrought iron which led into a flagstone courtyard boasting a fountain in the center, a number of banana palms, wisteria vines, and potted plants in enormous oil jars placed around the inner walls. When I had driven my car through the gates and down the long, dark alley and into the open courtyard, I got out and directed him where to park his motorcycle.

"Can it be seen from the street?" he asked directly, which puzzled me a little.

"Of course not," I replied, still concerned, but smiled a coy smile. "You're in good company. Not ashamed are you?"

He smiled, lifting the cycle as if it were made of cardboard and kicked out the parking prop. "You know I'm not. It's just that I don't want anybody to see it, that's all."

"It's safe," I assured. "Even if it's stolen, we can contact the police. You'll get your cycle back."

He gave me a quizzical look.

"I don't want to call the fuzz . . . understand?"

I failed to follow his line of reasoning.

"If it's stolen, Jesse, that's the logical thing to do."

"I don't want the fuzz," he implored, and there was a hint of malice in his voice. "You don't understand, Lily. There are a lot of thugs in this town who would give anything to snatch my motor, and if I call the fuzz it'll make things worse, that's all."

I gave him an understanding look, fumbled for my keys.

"Whatever you say, Jesse."

I went ahead of him up the stairs, listening with secret, exciting delight and a faint air of recklessness, to the tap tap of his boots on the metal treads. Goose pimples broke out all over me at the thought of this savage male following after me, soon to make love to me, I was certain. How could it be any other

way?

When I had unlocked the door and turned on the vari-colored lamps he surveyed the apartment with glee, almost like a child.

"You got a nice pad, Lily," he said, as I went to my zebra-skin covered bar and mixed two drinks.

I thought my place rather unique too, with the white leather divan and chairs, the Toshiba T.V., the ebony black furnishings, the room highlighted in colors of orange, emerald, and purple, my Kahlua wood carvings, my ivory statues of gods and goddesses, my Incan shield hanging over the divan, my fur rugs on the black tile floors.

He looked at my paintings which lined the walls as thickly as in an art museum, making light comments about each: a magnolia and Confederate flag, a primitive depicting savage armor, a matador, the young Christ, a male and female nude. Cleopatra life size, a modern Adonis holding a lion on his shoulder, a male and female in futuristic attire, more male nudes in all their glorious detail.

He looked, studied each intently while sipping his drink, but did not elaborate. Of this I was glad. He was at least sincere. He merely said what he thought, and did not, as so many people who do not know even the rudiments of art, take off on some improbable tangent, talking constantly, but saying nothing worthwhile.

When he had finished looking over the living room, we toured the bedroom and my enormous

bath and dressing niche. Idly, he picked up
canters of cologne, sparkling decanters, and sniff

"I like smells," he said, as he picked up a bot
from my gold and white dressing table and plac
it to his nose. "Pub, a cologne for me." He ga
me a wicked glance. "My, my, Lily, I didn't kn
you were that kind of *girl*."

"In case of emergency," I replied, without sham

"But you're not like that, really, are you?"
asked, deeply serious, and his blazing eyes we
serious too.

"I guess I should consider myself lucky then,"
said. "The first one since your husband."

"The *very* first, honest."

He smiled his intoxicating smile.

"I like that, Lily."

We returned to the bedroom. I switched on th
scarlet lamps on each side of the bed, then selecte
something for the hi-fi. Maria, from West Side Story
Soft and low, not high-brow nor low down. Return
ing to the bedroom, I found him standing beside
the bed, gazing down at it. His eyes were fixed
wishful, as if he wanted to sprawl in the middle
of the black fur spread, heaped with multicolored
pillows of velvet and satin. But that he dared not
yet, as if some unseen hand forbade him.

"You live like a queen, Lily," he remarked
thrusting his hands in his hip pockets. The crimson
light caught and held his expression, a glowing
profile of beauty, and I thought he resembled one

of the warriors from a Cecil B. DeMille movie, perhaps Sampson, lifting the veils for Delilah.

"Not really," I tried to explain, handing him a cigarette from a gold box on the night table. He leaned forward while I fired the lighter and lit it for him. "I just love beautiful things, Jesse."

"I do too, Lily," he said, and his voice was like velvet. "I always have. Jewelry, nice clothes, shiny new cars. And I'll have them again someday, just watch me and find out."

"I know you will, Jesse," I assured him, and for a moment we just stood there above the enormous bed, listening to the music, as if not knowing what to say or do. "It takes a long time to build an accumulation like this," I said at last, very slowly. "Take this apartment. I have collected statues and paintings and glassware for years. It gives me something to do on my days off. That is why they look as nice as they do, so appropriate, for I have all the time in the world to collect them. The mad collection of a lost and lonely heart."

"You couldn't ever be lonely, Lily," he said, looking squarely at me, his eyes reflecting the twin flames of the bed lamps. "You have everything, good looks, a nice pad, a fine car, money, while I . . . while I . . ."

"I didn't always, Jesse," I cried, interrupting him. I knew he was put down by his own personal failures, and I wanted to lift his spirit, to make him feel at home, wanted. "I was born on a one mule

farm in Mississippi, Jesse."

"I don't believe you."

"Would you believe I've hoed and picked cott ridden in a rickety old truck with my papa to t farmers' market to sell vegetables from our garden

He gave me a cocky look.

"Lily, you're putting me on."

"No, Jesse, I'm telling you the truth," I said g vely, going round the bed where I stood before round mirror on the wall and stood eyeing m reflection. "I used to help my mother in the kitche cooked, sewed, helped papa with the cows, milke washed clothes at an old spring down in the wood One day when I was about fifteen I leaned ov the well a little farther than was necessary I gue and one of the county boys, Roddy Walker, I thin coming down the lane about that time gave me goose. At that moment I grew up. I began to tak notice of my good looks. I thought I was a beaut then, because of that thumb up my ass, and realize that other boys took notice of me. I was alway healthy, had nice skin." I glanced at my arms i the mirror, my face, my neck. "One day I jus couldn't stand the farm and Mama and Papa an longer, so I ran away from home, headed for Holly wood. Got as far as Houston, Texas. After that, married and acquired a little sense. Took a course in art and interior decorating. I had always liked to fix things up. And I began to write short stories for love magazines. I have been a success in my

profession, not bragging, but a failure in everything else."

I paused, turned from the mirror and gazed at him.

"I have the highest regard for your talent, Lily," he said, taking a puff from his cigarette. "And you as a homo."

"I have learned most to be sincere," I said. "At least with myself. What I want is the genuine . . . genuine friends, genuine love, genuine faith in the future. I am tired to death of shoddy good times, people who are cheap, hypocritical, thrills that are not really thrills, just pretended nonsense. What I want now is to meet someone who is honest and clean and says what he believes and believes what he says."

"That leaves me out then," he said, his eyes a little sad.

"What makes you think so?" I asked, leaving the mirror and going to him. "Maybe I see in you all the things I want in a man, what I fail to see in other men, all the things, the qualities my husband failed to have."

He looked down at me then, his eyes dancing in the scarlet light, his lips slightly parted, his dimples showing in the semidarkness of my beautiful room.

"I can't give you anything, Lily. Right now I can't even give myself anything. I'm at rock bottom. Don't you know that?"

"I'm not speaking of material things," I blu
out, intoxicated by his warmth, his physical r
ness. "I want to be loved for myself alone, f
I cannot be loved for myself alone, then I had ra
not be loved at all."

He lifted his eyes, looked away, his gaze dist
remote.

"I can't even give you love, Lily. For I l
someone else."

This was hard to take, with him so near, in
own bedroom, with the red lights dimmed, mak
the room so pleasant, so inviting, the enormous
spread softly before us—waiting for our bodies
drinks aplenty to inflame our emotions and
minds, music to whirl us out of our senses.

He did have control. God he had control!

"I realize that," I said finally, gazing up into
far-away eyes, hopeful of luring his attention ba
to me. "I know you love your wife. I can acce
that." Then, recklessly, shamelessly, I put my ca
on the table, with the aces up. "Jesse . . . Jes
your marriage has failed. Mine has failed . . . m
erably. We are two lonely people cast upon t
world. We are still young. We still have desir
Would it be terrible—so terrible if we came to
compromise. We could be good for each other.
could give you what you want, what you need mo
now, clothes, money, a car, and you in return ca
give me what I want, what I need, your presenc
your body, your companionship."

"Do you know what you're saying, Lily?"

I looked at him with hard, deliberate eyes, thinking of all my past miseries, my heartaches, my total ruin.

"Yes . . . I know, Jesse."

"Sounds too good to be true," he said, toying with his cigarette, rolling it between his fingers. "But I've never been with . . . with another homo. I don't know. I just don't know."

It sounded so futile now, now that I had put my proposition so bluntly, and I was at a loss on which way to turn, what strategy to employ.

"It's not like I was a common . . ." I began, defiantly.

"Oh, I know that," he interrupted. "I like you, Lily. You're a fine-looking guy. Any man would jump at the chance. It's just that . . . that . . ."

"That your wife wouldn't approve," I finished for him.

"She don't give a damn, not really."

"Then, what's to stop us from being together, enjoying each other?"

His face was sad then in the red glow and his eyes in the intense, tragic light were the saddest I was ever to see.

"It's just that . . . that I still love Jackie, and just the very thought of going to bed with a homo kinda gives me the jitters—some kind of guilty feeling I can't explain. I feel like I'm hurting her, deep down, and all for pleasure and money. Oh, Lily,

I've done many, many rotten things to hurt h
things I'm very much ashamed of, but not this
not . . ."

I moved still closer to him, acting the bitc
reasoned blindly, and in doing so, felt his glow
warmth, the heat of his fine body seeping into mi

"I understand all that, Jesse," I said, putting
my bid, laying a nervous hand on his heaving che
"But we could live decently. You do need someo
to help you, someone to give you advice, pull y
out of the gutter. And you are in the gutter, Jes
and you'll keep going down, down, down. You ne
me, Jesse, need me to take you away from all th
filthy nightlife, the streets, those degenerate peop
you've been associating with. I would be good f
you and, in time, when you have clothes, mone
my car, then maybe you can win her back, be li
old times again."

He studied for a brief moment, his eyes lit wi
a strange, inner light. Then he gazed down at m
a long, thoughtful look.

"Maybe you can help me, Lily. And God know
I do need help. But," he shrugged. "I feel like
fool, a tramp. I feel dirty inside."

"I do want to help you, Jesse," I implored, m
head lifted to his, my heart in my eyes, "Please . .
please let me be good to you."

He nodded in acceptance. Then he snuffed ou
his cigarette in the enormous shell ashtray on th
night table.

"Do you mind if I shower?"

"It's your home now," I advised happily. "Do anything here that you like."

While he was taking a shower I slipped out of my clothes. Then, in elation, I slipped into my bright yellow silk lounging robe with the white fur trim.

When he had completed his shower, he came into the bedroom wearing only a lavender bath towel about his wet loins. I almost went faint at the sight of his smooth, muscular body dripping as if he had stepped from the ocean waves. He was so dark, so golden bronze there in the warm gold of the bed lamps, with his every muscle highlighted with shadow, every vein thrust out vividly, so animal, so savage in this prim, effeminate room, like a wild panther in a silken cage.

He looked so magnificent standing there in his full glory, without the misleading effects of his soiled, torn clothes; wearing the beauty of his masculinity as a king might wear a jeweled crown . . . as I knew he would look . . . as I had sensed it so emotionally back in Bruce's Lounge.

There was a fine layer of hair on his chest, not wiry and apelike which is so repulsive in many men, but silky and fine, and it lay closely along the satin rounds of his chest, a chest so broad it looked like the armour on a Roman centurion, his dark brown nipples showing plainly, protruding from the shadows the lamps made along their hard contours, hard

as the marble nipples seen on Greek statues.

My eyes wandered down his body, slowly, darin ly, devouring him completely, following the fi thin line of hair to his navel, where the soft textu of the towel began, then below to his heavily veine legs. I saw that his thighs were round, firm, lik melons, Herculean in strength, then to his calv which bulged like hard, round stones. I noticed h feet too, trim of ankle, hard of bone, keen, slim and parted in a fork at his big and second toe Devouring him completely in that one desirin gaze, awed, probing him hungrily. I sensed his sav agery, the ferocity within his beautifully formed body which, at any moment I reasoned, might un leash its strength, its vigor, to the overpowering angers and passions of a wild animal.

Yet, so calmly did he stand before me, glowing from his fresh, hot bath, his flesh radiant, warm and fragrant—gleaming like a statue dipped in melted gold.

"Would you dry me off, honey?" he asked and, without a moment's hesitation nor embarrassment, he unknotted the towel from his loins and handed it to me, standing completely naked in the middle of the room.

I took the towel in trembling hands as my eyes automatically slipped down his body. I shook in every tendon of my limbs, my whole body, my heart pounding until it seemed I could hear it in the depths of my breasts, as I dared to glimpse but for

an instant his maleness, the glory of his naked body which brought to the ultimate in my concepts of him, his stallionhood complete. The darkness there in the nest of curling hair, like a shadowy dream, his powerful, heavily veined penis swinging like a hose between his silken thighs, vigorous, darkly mysterious, the emblem of his young, splendid manhood.

He was the kind of man I craved for in my wildest dreams.

He was sex personified. He was so darkly male he seemed to smell of sex, the ferocity of his forceful personality trapped there in the long, heavy organ until the opulence of his desires awakened it to gore out its ultimate goal.

Jesse! Just as I had dreamed he would be. Just as I knew he would be. Just as any homo who is genuine can know about a genuine man.

With trembling, uneasy hands I dried his chest, running the soft towel down his huge forearms, felt their hardness, their strength, and going limp at their feel. Then I dried his chest, slowly, carefully, watching with anxious motion how the hair bristled, as when you stroke a healthy animal.

"You have a nice physique, Jesse," I blurted out nervously before I realized what I was saying, my voice, my manner twitchy, trembling like a thief caught in the act of stealing, as I kept stealing glances at his robust sex equipment. "God, oh God, but you are a man, a real he-man."

And before I could catch my breath, he mov closer, snatched me close as he swept me into h arms. I felt in a wild flurry his face go over min his lips touching my lips, softly at first, then ma deningly. He bent my body back, his strong brow arms going down and around my waist, his lip molten now, hot, panting, sliding from my lip down my throat, into the hollow of my breasts.

I let out tiny, agonized cries—cries of ecstasy, m whole body melting under his dark, vigorou strength, his strong grip on me making me go weak An instant more and he had pulled me to the bed his long wondrous fingers pulling away my robe Those fingers slid like oil down my flesh, to my shorts, fondled there until I squealed and my body stiffened then pulled their silken nothingness down my willing legs, and with deliberate sureness, the art of sexual sleight-of-hand.

Then, like a dark and glorious dream, he was up between my legs and over me, completely covering my world. And suddenly, as he gored me with his enormous, stiff penis, completely in one slippery, hungered-for thrust, a wild thrill went through me the like of which I had never known. Then, to the opened throttle of his full power, all tight-wedged into me and cloistered for this purpose, locking in a vise my body to his, as bone and muscle bore on bone and muscle, he worked his mighty organ into my anus, our bodies blending like hot wax, his hard, muscular thighs spreading their way against

my thighs, his maleness working its enormous way deep into me with the regularity of a piston in warm oil.

Suddenly, as he clung to me frantically, goring and filling me again and again, thrilling us both . . . suddenly he was mine.

Jesse, in this wild moment and this madness, was mine, in this dark room, in my own bed, in my arms, giving himself to me completely, fluxing out of his pent-up body, his pent-up drives, all the sexual craving he had kept locked in his throbbing groin since he had lost his wife. He was giving all this to me, giving himself wholly, every muscle, every nerve, his every sexual want, one urge heaped upon another since his wife had denied him her body, her love, the base, carnal pleasures of his appetite.

And he had such an enormous sexual appetite.

His hard, dark arms folded themselves under my body, lifting my buttocks, caressing me maddeningly, their hardness now turned to the softness of velvet. And his heaviness pressing into me, and his massive strength, now turned animal, were tossing the reins of reserve aside, and he became wild and loose and free in his giving, driving his male augur to the hilt, to the very end of me, thrusting his tortured sexual drive all through me, and in wild and flowing rhythms, sharpening my every nerve to their extremities, shuddering into my greedy, pulling loins thrill upon thrill.

And when he lay still on my weary body at last,

panting for breath, our bodies drenched in swe
he folded me to him warmly, kissed me fondly
the cheek, the eyes, the lips, covering my body,
world with his sexual love . . . the love he h
forgotten he had owned, the kind of love I h
forgotten I would find again in any man.

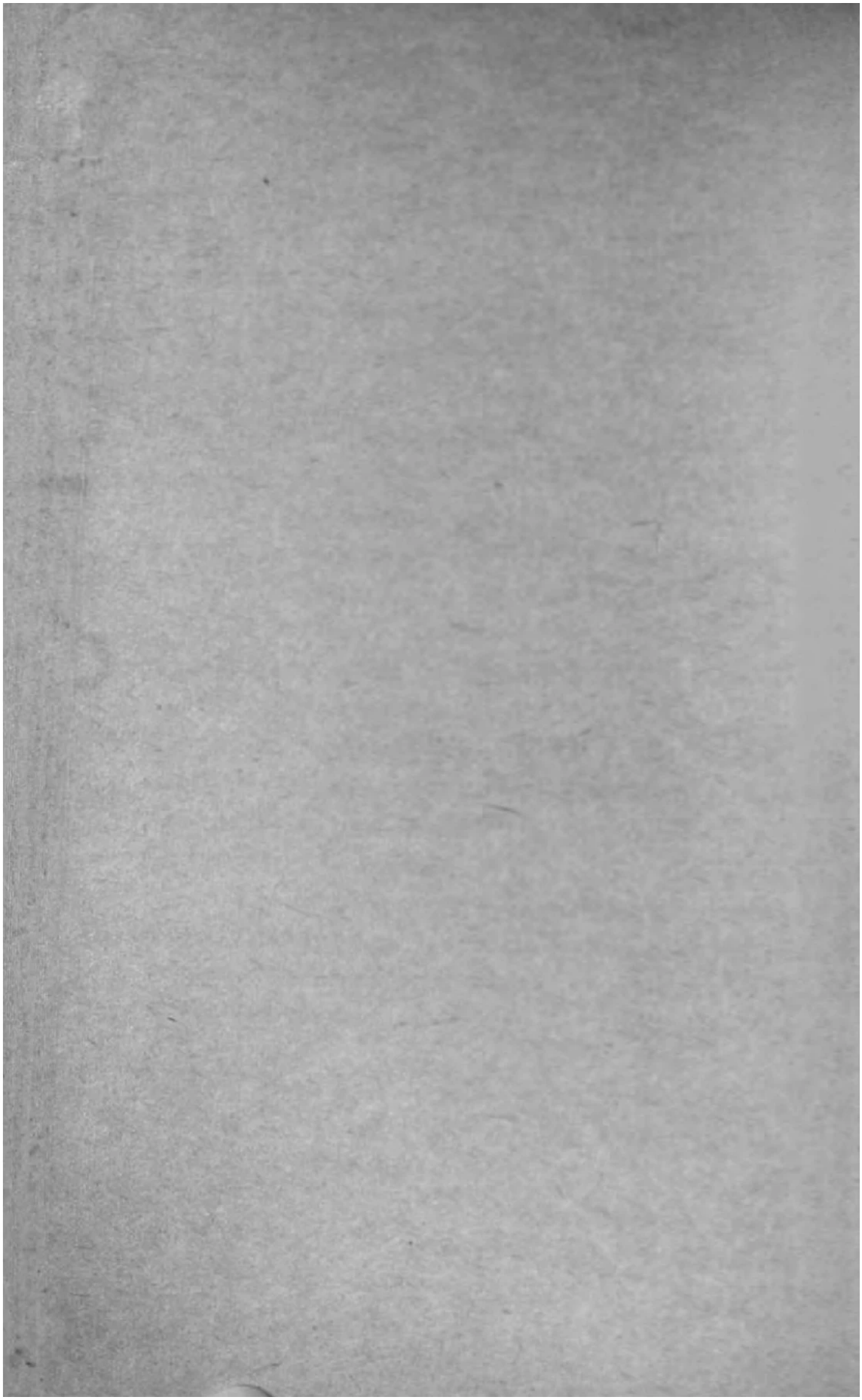
We were fulfilling our loneliness and our pent-
longings. We melted into each other, like candl
held to a flame, gorging ourselves on the hunge
we had withheld, the love and passion we had d
nied ourselves, the wild and frantic lusts when w
thought those lusts cold and dead in the desolati
of our tortured, broken hearts.

Now we had each other. Love or not. We ha
each other.

When he lay asleep in my arms, his face nestle
in the hollow of my neck, and I remained awak
listening to his soft, contented breathing, I mad
a vow to myself.

"God," I murmured beneath my breath, "let m
keep him for my very own. Let me keep him lik
a beautiful statue to look at and adore, to caress
like a wild pink rose. Let me keep him always, and
I'll ask nothing more."

PART II



Jesse dressed and left before dawn. But two nights later he came back. The doorbell rang and when I opened the door with a rush he stood there in the half-darkness, more dishevelled than when I had first met him, his shirt in tatters, a patch over one eye, drenched in the downpour of rain. "Can I come in, Lily?" he asked timidly.

"Sure," I said, opening the door wide as he passed through.

I fixed him a hot meal while he took a hot shower, and when he had eaten, he lay back on the bed naked while I applied tincture of methiolate to his wounded hands and face.

"What in the world happened?" I asked seriously, wondering how anyone so handsome and cool could

get so mangled, so mutilated.

"Them punks jumped me," he said, as if that was a plausible explanation. "I had to come here. They're still looking for me."

"Oh," I said, falling back in disappointment. I had flattered myself that he had come purposely to see me. "Why are they after you?"

"One of them got fresh with my wife, so I laid him on his ass. Pardon me, Lily, I didn't go to say that."

"It's all right," I said lowly, noticing that he did not flinch when I applied the burning methiolate. "But I thought you were through with your wife?"

"I am," he muttered, sitting up in bed and reaching for a cigarette from the gold box on the night table. "But I don't want no punk pawing her. Do you blame me, Lily?"

I shook my head, for I could not find words for that. But I thought: if he was through with her, why did he still try to protect her from other men, and I assumed momentarily that there had to be more to it than that.

"No punk has a right to play up to my wife," he went on hoarsely, dragging at his cigarette which he kept thrust between his lips, cowboy fashion.

"They have every right," I said, a little bitter. "That is, if you are through with her. If you don't want her, then let someone else have her."

He was silent then, and as unconscious about his nakedness as if he had come from the Garden of

Eden. But I didn't mind. In fact, I gloried in devouring him with my eyes, admiring his fine body without being so conspicuous about it.

Since he did not try to counter my last remark I added:

"You don't want her, do you, Jesse?"

"I do still love her," he answered, not looking at me. "But Jackie and I can't make it, Lily. We don't even speak."

"And you still fight over her? That seems odd."

"I can't explain it, Lily. I guess I'm jealous of her in a way, like I used to be when we were married. I just can't help it."

I stuck a band-aid to his brow, raised up and looked down at him tiredly, a little annoyed that he kept bringing her into our world, as if she were a shadow that always stood between us, defying, ridiculing, ominous.

"Jesse, tell me something. Is all this drinking and fighting about your wife really, or—or do you just love to drink and fight for drinking and fighting's sake?"

"Naw, Lily, honest. It's about her. I try to avoid her. When I go to one joint she follows me there. If I get up and leave then she follows me to the next one, from the Candelight to the Riviera, then to Vic's, then back to the Riviera, trying to catch me with another girl I guess."

"And you don't speak to each other?"

He shrugged.

"Well, she don't speak to me, so I don't sp
to her."

"Couldn't you just be friends then? Sit down
grown ups, talk it over? It seems to me that if
loved her once, and she loved you and bore
a son, then at least you could still be close frie
Surely you both can enjoy each other's compa
as friends, without loving each other, making l
I mean."

He studied for a moment, took his cigarette fr
his lips and, in doing so, dropped ashes on his na
thigh. He wiped them off carelessly, evasively, le
ing a dark stain.

"I guess you're right, Lily."

"I know I'm right, Jesse. Seeing her once in
while, talking things over, taking her to your bab
grave, might be what it will take to stop some
your heavy drinking and useless fighting. You ca
go on like this, Jesse, night after night, in nightcl
after nightclub, following her around, being the ho
knight with sword and shield. You don't have
play the hero in front of her, unless she is insane
proud or egotistical."

"She's none of them things," he said in her d
fense, even though I suspected he did not unde
stand them. "I'll try to see her, Lily, talk to he
Maybe things will be better."

I looked at him for a kind moment, wanting de
perately to help him, but not knowing exactly how

"I'll buy you some clothes, Jesse," I suggested

after a minute's consideration. "You can borrow my car. Go see her in style. Make her think you've done well for yourself. How about that?"

He smiled a hearty smile, as eager as a child. "I'd like that, Lily."

I did shop for new clothes for him, and what a pleasure it was for me to do this. I had always loved to shop, regardless of what it was for. I had good taste. Gino Paoli shirts, tropical textured suits—one casket gray the other mauve—Stanley Blacker Corduroys in gray and pale blue, an ash grey suit in tycoon checks, an El Greco in bold, hopsack weave, an English buckskin topcoat, V-neck and mock-turtle sweaters, banlon knits in several colors, Blucher oxfords in shining black, sport coats by McGregor, a skipper blue, a dark maroon, a black, a canary yellow, and a black tapered mod suit by Timely of New York. And a silky Botany. Mod shirts galore by Jayson, London slacks cut down to the cosmopolitan thirteen inches at the base, Bolero ties, and gads of gaudy cuff-links. I also bought him a starfire ring mounted in beaten gold, a gold wristwatch with an ebony face, and a platinum love ring in jade mosaic.

He was eager to try them on, and went through them like a kid. He tried on clothes almost all one day, and that Friday he begged me to go with him to the Riviera, a nightclub in Port Allen's Goldcoast.

I would have gone to hell with him and back, but to the Goldcoast, I was a bit reluctant. I had

heard rumors of the roughhousing that went on those delapidated honkytonks across the river, fights, the killings; knew that practically no l existed beyond the river bridge, and hardly a we passed that some murder or rape or knifing or r bery did not make the headlines. But Jesse seem so anxious to have people see him with me, ma such a play over my good looks, the way I wou knock them cold, that I consented.

He wore his black, shiny Botany, a white sh with tiny ringlets of lace down the front, a thi shoestring tie, ruby cufflinks, and his shiny bla slippers.

When he came out of my dressing room, radian his black hair curled down over his brow in fro his shiny black suit, smelling of cologne, fresh shaved and bathed, he simply took my breath.

God! He was handsome!

I never realized that clothes could make such change. I had pictured him in my mind the wa he would look dressed properly, but I had no inklin he would be this attractive. I believe he was th handsomest man I had ever seen, for his savag darkness, his lithe build, his merry, twinkling eye the easy, graceful way in which he wore his ne clothes, as if he had dressed in fine linen all hi life, set him as a person unique. And I think I bega to love him at that moment, really love him, fro the heart, not the love of his hard dark body, hi thrilling sex.

"Well, how do I look?" he asked, as he came out of the dressing room and stood in the center of the bedroom for an inspection. The red bed lamps were on, and their crimson glow reflected along his shiny, immaculate face, his long dark fingers, his glowing shirt, and he became in my eyes a god to me. His black hair shone like silk, and the freshness of his smell, the glitter of his rings, his ready, spontaneous smile, the sparks of quicksilver in his eyes, made of him the reckless, debonair hero in my eyes, the captivating lover the symbol of masculinity.

"You are the handsomest man in Baton Rouge," I said, and with honesty. I would have liked to see the man who could have compared with him. The perfect escort, the perfect gentleman. And I thought, dared to think, the male Cinderella whom I had magically transformed from rags to riches, from a tramp into a man of the world, was a man who, later that night, would lie with me naked, my body wrapped in his coiling arms, my thighs around his hard, shuddering thighs.

I let him have the fun of selecting from my wardrobe what he wanted me to wear. Seeing him dressed to perfection now, knowing how proud, how elated I would feel being escorted by him, I felt festive, reckless. He pulled out of my closet a shimmering black suit.

He drove, smelling of Pub cologne, and I sat leaning against the side glass admiring him as he took to the wheel like a cowboy takes to a wild

stallion. The music from the radio was soft, begu
ing, and the splashes of lights from the numero
cars running over the river bridge gleamed ba
at us eerily, and the chemical plant at Kaiser Al
minum blazed so brilliantly it looked like a fai
city out of a Walt Disney movie. To the left of
the brightly lit spire of the capitol building ro
into the darkness, and the shimmering river fa
below, though a little frightening, failed to wre
me from my present holiday mood.

I wanted a good time tonight with Jesse, to liv
life with him to the hilt, and in the back of m
mind, selfishly, I wanted to be that beautiful, tanta-
lizing "other man."

When he parked at last in front of the club and
we got out onto the wide expanse of gravel, I sensed
already, instinctively, the wild revelry that was
going on inside the place. Literally hundreds of cars
were parked completely around the building, which
was a dilapidated barn, painted with white which
had long since been dulled to a moldy grey by the
rain and the tropical elements. It was trimmed in
red, and boasted a tier of small grimy windows
which ran completely down one side.

Couples were making their way over the crunch-
ing gravel hurriedly, the music inside blaring so
loudly you could hear it a mile, and a number of
coarse, drunken boys were milling around outside,
some in laughing groups, others in pairs, bottles and
beer cans in their hands, shouting greetings, cursing,

spitting out obscene language.

He opened the door wide for me, speaking to several wobbling boys we met in a narrow, low-ceilinged hall, passing an oval, well-lit bar crowded with men, and into the main dancing section. Though it was intensely dark inside, tiny colored lights pinpointing the walls on all four sides, hundreds of faces could be picked out clearly, many on the dance floor living it up to the lively "Judy in Disguise," and many seated around the numerous tables on both sides of the dancing area. To the rear a stage stood out above the heads of those seated, on which a small country orchestra sweated from a frenzied dedication to their musical instruments, their shiny brows visible across the spacious room.

Jesse found us a table about halfway center, and when he had seated us, he motioned for a waitress.

"It's jammed tonight, Lily," he said, all pepper and vinegar, ready, it seemed, to get going. He rubbed his hands together eagerly, as if they were cold, his elbows propped on the table, and he eyed the motley dancers as if, by merely watching them, he was being put under a reckless spell, one which he could not break.

When the drinks were brought, we took a sip or two.

He was breathtaking. The band went into "Georgy Girl," "I'm a Believer," "The Race is On," and in the excitement I found that he was holding

my hand. I felt that I had won a few points wi
him, until he motioned to a girl making her w
among the dancers, and then I knew, sadly, wh
my hand was in his.

"That's my wife," he said, and he said it wi
such enormous pride that she seemed elevated b
it. But as I watched her, curiously at first, then stur
by jealousy, an odd sensation came over me.

Even in the mad melee of faceless faces, shadow
that were not people it seemed, bodies moving i
unison with the maddening music, even then, th
girl, Jesse's wife, stood out from all the others a
this Riviera club. Holding herself as if a hundre
cameras were focused on her, her dark head hel
high, her long black hair falling like water to he
waist, she came past, not far from our table, paused
surveyed the mob, like the huntress Diana migh
look for animals in a forest, regal, lithe as a sapling
dark-lidded eyes, a ghost quality about her, perhap
because of the way the smoke filled room lay its
light on her hair, her features appearing to me
almost translucent, as if she might have been an
illusion, and not real at all.

"She's beautiful, Jesse," I said to him, not able
to take my eyes from her, and I watched intently
as she remained, picking out the faces in the crowd,
as if she was counting them. Her gaze dragged
round to us, she looked for but a moment, then she
turned abruptly and made her way out of the club.

"She's seen us," Jesse said, and when she was gone

he removed his hand from mine and picked up his drink. In one sure draught he drained its contents, his dark head thrown back, the veins in his throat standing out like taut cords.

Annoyed that he had held my hand purposely just so that his wife could get a glimpse of us seated close, affectionately, I turned on him.

"You're using me, Jesse," I said. "You only wanted me to come here so that your wife could see you with a homo."

"See how you do me," he chided, pointing an accusing finger at me, and he laughed recklessly. The gesture was so cute coming from him I had to laugh too, and I momentarily forgot my wrath.

Then his expression of merriment waned and something of seriousness took its place.

"Don't mind me too much tonight, Lily," he murmured, taking the fifth of C.C. and mixing himself another drink. "I'm not using you. It's just that Jackie thinks I can't get anyone else just cause I use to run after her all the time. I went all the way to Jackson, Mississippi twice to get her and bring her back, and I can't chase her for the rest of my life, Lily. I've tried to hold onto her, but we just can't get along. We've tried it and it just won't work." He gulped down another drink, and in the darkness of this smoke-filled room his face looked flushed, his hair now falling in enormous ringlets over his brow. I noticed too that perspiration was forming on his forehead, and there was

a pinched look about his eyes.

We danced again, this time to "Headaches the Number," and he held me excitingly close, powerful arms around my waist, drawing me snugly against his moving body the buttons on coat pressed against my breasts, and his face agai my face, so lovingly, so warm, it stole into emotions and I tried to forget for a moment t he had had too much to drink.

"It's hot in here," he said. He wiped his bro gazed uneasily about him, as if expecting someo or something to happen, to erupt—some expecte prerehearsed happening, and I began to feel uneas After all, this was my first outing with him, a I did not like the Riviera club particularly, nor a of the joints on the west side of the river.

Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, appeared th snappy-eyed Myrtle we had known from Bruce Lounge. She ignored me completely, and sidlin directly up to Jesse, her face beaming with a ready come-on smile, her overly large breasts pressed int his shoulder blade, she asked him for a dance. H agreed, a little wobbly on his feet as he tried t get up, and when he put his arms around her and led her out into the dance floor she turned and gave me the go-to-hell look. It infuriated me, and I became even more outraged as I sat stiffly and watched them dance. It was a catchy number, "Louie, Louie," and, though the other couples danced the Frug, not touching, he clung to her as

if they were glued together. You couldn't have pried them loose with a fingernail file, and his hand roving down to her black mammy behind did little to comfort me either.

I tried to shrug it off, attributing his unbecoming manner to his drinking, but I writhed when that dago bitch raised on tip-toe at the end of the dance and kissed him squarely on the lips. I considered his lips mine, his whole body for that manner. I had bought and paid for him, and I wanted no trespassing.

When he returned, I tried to act nonchalant, but, even in his inebriation he seemed to notice a difference in my behavior, for almost falling into his chair, his head hung loosely over the table, an inch from mine.

"I don't mean no harm, Lily, honest. Just want a good time. I'm going home with you, understand?"

I nodded, smiled, but I failed to understand. He had brought me out and I saw no sound reasoning in why he should make such an obvious show over that dago wench, unless he was trying to make me jealous, as he had tried to make his wife jealous with me. This thought braced me a little, and out of the joy of it I mixed him and me a drink, while he sat and watched musedly, his black hair in tatters, his blue eyes blazing.

"You're my buddy, Lily," he muttered, indistinctly and I almost winced at that. I wanted to be anything but his buddy. I just wasn't the buddy

type, especially to any man, and most of all h

"Let's shake then," I said jokingly, since t was nothing else I could do, thrusting out my h Surprisingly he took it in his, gave it a firm gr

"You're . . . you're the most understanding per I know, Lily. I—I couldn't ever do without y honest."

I was more than glad to hear this, but noti with disdain his downing the hatch with anot drink as if he was putting out a fire in a wastebask

"Fix me up again, baby," he said, shoving t glass to my side of the table. I obliged, not realizi what I was doing, the harm that was later to ful itself because of his quick, desperate inebriation.

"You can fix them better than my wife," h mumbled, as his head began to wobble. Then, the first sounds of the band as it went into th spirited "Dixie" he leaped up, ignoring me com pletely, as if he sat alone, and stalked through th mob to the dance area. There were a number o whistles and rebel yells, as dancers began t infiltrate the spacious floor, and in the heart-thrillin moment I lost Jesse completely. Frantically, searched for him amid the bouncing shadows, a rough and reckless men, all of them well on their way to becoming drunk, whirled their feminine partners to the stirring, patriotic sounds . . . a tune all Southerners love dearly, and become automati- cally rejuvenated whenever its stirring notes are sounded.

Then, as if something electric snapped through the air, the music stopped, and dancers began to scatter. I rose from my chair, thinking a fire had broken out in the place. Instead I saw Jesse. He was bending over a man he had just knocked down and, as the man tried to rise he hit him again and again in the face, hard, enraged strokes which made dull thuds I could hear, even from across this enormous room. Beside him stood his wife, her hands to her face, her entire figure suddenly ghostly white, and there was about her the tense, frightened look of agony.

Several bolder men moved in then, rough-looking men from what I could see of them in the diffused light, and grabbing Jesse by both arms, they attempted to drag him from the commotion. The man on the floor, his nose bleeding, his white dress shirt torn, leaped up quickly and disappeared through the churning mob.

Then, as if by some kind of terrible superhuman power, of unleashed strength, Jesse tore loose from the two men. Like lightening his arm shot out, his fist a hard knot, and struck one of the men on the jaw. Screams went up among the women, and perhaps I screamed too, I was not certain. My every fiber, my whole being, was keyed to Jesse, his safety, the wild thought that his fine body might be harmed, his dark handsome face beaten, mutilated.

As the man fell back against the other men standing round, their fists clenched, Jesse struck the sec-

ond one, swinging his arms in a wild, graceful
almost the exact gesture of a baseball pitcher.
fist, with a dull impact, landed in the man's fa
directly at the bridge of his nose. Blood gush
stained his shirt front like enormous red flowe
Pandemonium broke loose then, and I tru
screamed now, as several tough, apelike m
jumped Jesse. They were all over him in a minu
but surprisingly they were off again as Jesse, swin
ing both fists in a wide arc, scattered them like t
pins. Then two more jumped him, and were flu
back against the screaming mirage of frighten
girls. People were moving everywhere now, da
shadowy shapes against the dim lights, the smok
like frantic beings out of dreams and nightmar
With their movements, and through them it seeme
to me, one of the huge, gigantic men, who attende
the bar, wedged his way to where Jesse stood. The
from the darkness appeared the flighty Myrtle. The
gathered around Jesse, as he stood, his head dow
like a giant elk lulled during the throes of a battle
his shiny black hair in wild tangles about his face
framing him like moss in the wind, his tie askew
his fashionably cut coat pushed back over hi
shoulders. The huge man caught him by the elbow
led him to our table.

"You better get him outa here," the man said
"Or there's going to be trouble . . . plenty of trouble.
And I don't want it here in my place."

"Thanks, I will," I said nervously, rising from the

chair.

"I don't want to go," growled Jesse obstinately, jerking his arm away from the bartender. "I—I couldn't help it. That—that son of a bitch was pawing my wife."

"You'll have to settle it outa here," the bartender said with equal gruffness, as people began to gather around our table, including that tart Myrtle. God, I loathed her!

"Come on, baby," I insisted, taking Jesse by the hand. Obediently he followed, or rather wobbled, his arms hanging loosely at his sides, apelike as he swayed drunkenly, bumping into people, chairs, tables, as I tried to pick a clear way.

Once at the bar, turning into the low ceilinged hallway toward the entrance, someone yelled:

"You sure know how to pick them!"

But I didn't pay any attention. I only wanted one thing, frantically to get Jesse out of this disreputable place, and safely into my apartment, before ten or twelve of them closed in on us and beat him into a pulp. At the entrance he jerked away from me, reeled, spun round to face the dance floor again, his eys blazing, his sweaty face gleaming eerily in the half-darkness. Then, as if he had thought better of the situation, or as if some voice had called him, a voice no one heard but himself, he obediently turned back and followed me out the door which a thoughtful boy was holding open for me.

"I'm sorry, Li—Lily," Jesse muttered, the sound

of his voice thick, muffled. "Sorry, Lily."

"It's alright, baby," I assured him, halfway h
ing him up as we slid our way over the loose gr
to my car.

A couple, a little shaky on their feet, met u
the hot, teeming darkness. The boy recognized Je
He gave a ridiculing laugh, or what I thought
ridiculing. He may have been in a joking mood
when we passed, he turned, cried back in a you
boyish voice:

"You got the *lady* under control, Jesse?"

"Go to hell!" Jesse yelled back, flinging an a
wildly.

Weaving in and out among the cars, detouri
around giggling groups who made undistinguishab
blobs in the darkness, I finally found my Thund
bird. It seemed farther away now, alone and to its
beyond an enormous mud puddle; the numero
cars parked around it when we had first come i
had since left, and I had a difficult time of it gettin
Jesse around the expanse of mud and water an
holding him erect until I could unlock the car doo

Then, as if they loomed up out of the darkne
from nowhere, advanced a file of ghastly lookin
boys about Jesse's and my age. They were all bulk
in weight, pot bellied, thick of arm and limb, wit
black leather jackets emblazoned with badges
chains, stars, and what appeared to be ball caps
or army field caps with the long visors obliterating
their features. But they were mean-looking, terrify-

ing as they advanced, their arms spread apelike, their fists clamped into hard round balls. With eyes starved for violence they completely swarmed around us and the car.

One of them, the largest of the group, grabbed Jesse by the coat collar, spun him round.

"Leave him alone!" I cried faintly, frightened out of my senses, hoping to use my wits to stall them off.

"Stay out of this, Queer!" one of them shouted, a pinched-nosed, monkey-faced boy with a crew cut and cold, beady eyes. He slipped a gun from out of his clothes somewhere, jammed it into my side. "Your boyfriend got a gun?"

"Heavens no!" I cried meekly, my knees shaking like water.

"Got a gun in that car?" he growled, as the others crowded closer.

"No! No!" I cried faintly.

He turned then to face the boy who held Jesse. "He's all yours, Ponto! Get his ass, man!"

The burly man swung wildly, instantaneous. His huge fist struck Jesse in the face, and with such force Jesse stumbled backwards, his head automatically jerking back rigidly by the blow, his hair sailing out in wild, loose strands. The man struck him again. There was a dull thud, like a club striking a sack of cornseed. Jesse again stumbled backwards, his drunkness handicapping his body with the limp instability of a rag doll.

I all but panicked, in as much pain for Jesse if those hard, steel-like fists had struck me in t face instead of him. I sensed the worst. I felt fran cally that in Jesse's condition—or even sober—h didn't stand a dog's chance against this raving mo He was badly outnumbered and, with the alcoh in his blood stream the odds were stacked again him. And realizing this, seeing the merciless fis again and again pounding into him, his face, h chest, his lifeless arms, I began to sob, wringing m hands hysterically.

"Please! Please! Don't hurt him! Please don't hur him!"

I tried to move toward him, as the dull thud o bone against flesh filled the night with horror.

"Want what he's getting!" cried the ratty boy who pushed the gun barrel further into my ribs "You just stay put, or we'll muss that sexy face o yourn!"

"But that man's killing him!" I cried out desper- ately, outraged. "I'm calling the police!" I tried vainly to push my body around the pistol barrel, which had me pressed between it and the car. I had never had a gun pointed at me before in my life, but I remained cool enough to believe, or think, this punk wouldn't pull the trigger.

At the mention of police a wild revelry sprang up among them.

"Ain't no police in ten mile of here, queer boy," one of them chuckled.

"I'll scream then," I cried out desperately, sobbing still at the sight of Jesse being mauled, my every sense, my every sensation keyed to his agonies as if they were mine. His fine body reeled again and again each time the boy's fist plunged into him, and I felt the pain of that fist the impact of every blow on blow.

"Go ahead and scream, you faggot," the boy with the pistol growled, roughing me up a little. "That band's making such a helluva racket inside they couldn't hear if a bomb went off. So scream, you fuckin' bitch, scream!"

I kept silent, as every nerve tore like electrical currents throughout my body.

Jesse! Jesse! my soul screamed, as I held my hands over my mouth to keep from going into convulsions.

Then, mercifully, when I thought all else had failed, when I knew, inconsolably, that this was the end of him, he suddenly snapped back to life. As if he had been plugged into a live-wire circuit he backed away several steps, his feet wide apart, his lithe body lifting itself up to his normal height, his hard fists instinctively balled. Like an enraged gorilla brought to bay, he prepared himself to stand his ground.

"If you want some of me, get me," he shouted at them, pivoting this way and that, as they began to tighten the circle around him.

"We gonna kill you, you hustling motherfucker," one of them shouted. "Wanta fuck every bitch you

see. We'll show you! We'll show you!"

I suddenly went sick at this accusation.

Another roared as if the world was hard of ing.

"Think you're hot shit on that motor, don't We'll show you, you fucker! We gonna ground

"Like I said," Jesse struck back at them with words, his voice now clear. "If you want a of my ass, come and get it. I'm waiting for y

One of the boys lunged. Jesse's hard fist sho like a cobra striking its prey. The boy reeled b wards into the mud. He tried to get up, but sliding back and forth in the slime until he soaked. Another one, prancing back and forth a dancer, hopeful of finding an opening to Je body left unguarded. He seized his opportunity, out a wild left, missed. Like a flash of light J struck him squarely between the eyes. Before boy could recover his senses another fist lan against his left ear. He lost his balance, one pinned under him as he sat down in the m abruptly. Two rushed him then, as I stood watchi paralyzed. A great surge of admiration rose within me for Jesse. Drunk or not, he was a fight And I gloried in watching him. His arms shot like a machine, withdrew, repeated the same acti again, as the punks caught his fists bluntly, stagger back, moved in for more.

Blood began to stream down their faces, jacke were ripped, medals and chains came loose, fell in

the mud, trampled, shouts rang out, muffled with the hollow impact of a steel fist in their guts, moans poured out from the circle of madness like ill omens, and cursing and growls and hysterical cries rent the night air, sliced it with horror as they all became animals before my tear-filled eyes.

They moved in on him at last, as he began to show signs of weariness, strain, his breath coming in gushing streams, jerks, as his fine new coat was being stripped from his body, as his white shirt became blood soaked rags, his sweaty flesh shining through the stained tatters.

They're going to really kill him, I thought maddeningly for the hundredth time as I saw him go down beneath an entanglement of arms and legs flinging, kicking, pounding. Fists rained down on him as he lay then curled protectively in the soft mud, his hands brought defensively to his face where mud caked boots sank hard metal heels into his cheeks, his nose, his neck, against his fine tapering fingers, fingers that had stolen over my body so lovingly.

"God damn you! God damn you!" bellowed the one who had attacked him first, his guttural voice ringing through the wild darkness, as he slammed his fists and boots into him. "I'm gonna kill you! I'm gonna kill you!"

"Stop! Stop!" I screamed, as I watched them bending over, pulverizing him as he sank further into the slime. His face was filled with blood, his

hair soaked, plastered against his face, his ears,
he began to agonize, his entire body shudde
from pain and shock. As if his nerve centers w
being drawn inward, he lay in the mud as if
cramp, his knees drawn up to his chin, his bl
soaked arms coiled defensively around his bleed
face, his dishevelled hair.

"Shut that fuckin' queer's trap somehow!" sh
ed one of the punks, as he suddenly turned wh
he straddled Jesse's body.

I fell back against the car, too frightened to mo
Jesse was dead. I knew crazily that he was de
No one could endure such a ruthless onslaught. A
he had fought so bravely. Such a fighter to go do
unsung. A living machine. A flesh and blood we
on.

It was the end, as I covered my eyes with
hands, as the sounds of fists and boots against
quivering flesh screamed through my ears, to
through every fibre of my being.

Then, from somewhere, from out of nowhere
siren began to make its sound known, and the thu
began to run suddenly, like birds that scatter wh
a stone is thrown. They darted in and out amo
the cars, disappeared into the darkness.

The siren belonged to an ambulance, and it sp
down highway 190, turned off on a side street, va
ished into the night. I ran to where Jesse la
sprawled in mud and blood.

"Jesse!" I cried excitedly, kneeling down besi

him. I caught hold of his arm, tried to pull him up.

"Let go!" he yelled feebly, bitterly, jerking his hand back. I stood up, ankle deep in the slush and gravel, my pumps ruined.

"It's me, Jesse. It's Lily. I want to get you into the car, to my apartment, before . . . before those boys come back."

"Let them come," he bellowed, wobbling back and forth in the mud, his fine clothes completely ruined. "I'll beat hell out of them, Lily. Take them all on."

"You're in no condition to fight now," I said, bending down to him once more. "I've got to get you home." Frantically, I looked around, hopeful of finding someone who could help me. I took hold of him and tried to drag him towards the car.

"Get out! Leave!" he flung back, his voice muffled, eerie. "Don't want you to see me this way . . . Lily."

A boy with blonde curly hair came up and, without saying a word helped me get Jesse through the mud and into the back seat of the car.

"Thanks," I murmured, out of breath, as I got in behind the wheel.

He smiled, held the door for me.

"Always glad to help out a pretty *lady*." He slammed the car door.

I was off in a wild, unreasoning flash, speeding down 190 and over the bridge and into Baton Rouge.

All that way he kept calling Jackie repeatedly, a
names I had not heard him mention before: Ron
G-Joe, and a name that sounded like Keith.

At the apartment he came to a little, but I ha
a terrible time getting him up the long flight
metal steps and through the paneled door. He clun
to me like a limp doll, smearing my dress with mu
and blood, his drunken face against mine. Finally
as I kept up with his staggering, clinging to hi
desperately, we made it to the bed where h
sprawled, a muddy, drunken heap on my elaborat
black fur and satin pillows.

We were both in bad shape, as I glanced wearily
at him, my chest heaving from almost having t
carry him up the narrow steps, out of breath, then
at my hair smeared with blood, mixed darkly with
mud.

Slipping out of my soiled things, I drew warm
water and bathed his face, his hands, and tried to
take off his clothes, but he was so limp, so weighty,
I couldn't budge him.

God! what a mess I've gotten myself into, I mur-
mured to myself, praying a little, as I doctored his
wounds. A deep jagged cut swelled above his right
eye, almost directly on top of the old cut he had
when I first met him. Both eyes were blackened,
his ears and the skin about them were cut with long
red gashes, and around his lower jaw and chin a
number of bruises and cuts marred his good looks,
completely disfiguring his features. His hair was

matted with blood, and a number of deep cuts criss-crossed along his hair line and on the dome of his brow. His lips too were beginning to swell, and his teeth were a mass of thick, purplish blood.

As I wiped away the filth on his face, stroked back his hair, he began to sob, the streams of tears running down each side of his face and onto the pillow.

"Lily . . . Lily, I didn't mean to . . ." he cried, his voice thick, choked. He pulled me to him, burying my face in the hollow of his neck, and all was forgiven. He stroked my hair with trembling, blood caked hands, kissed me fondly, his breath rancid from the foul odor of the whiskey burning out his insides.

"I just want you to get well, Jesse," I murmured. "And not to ever go to that dreadful place again."

"I won't ever, Lily," he said gravely. "I promise."

I didn't sleep a wink that night, for he tossed and turned, moaned in his agony I knew he felt, cried out names, curse words, broken sentences I tried to piece together, to make heads and tails of but I couldn't. He thrashed about wildly, flung his hands out, striking the bed, my own body, kicked, pawed, pulled himself up into a ball, unwound, shaking the whole bed with such force I was fearful of it falling in.

The next morning his face was a swollen, purple puff. His eyes had completely closed, glued to the lids with blood and matter, and his complexion had

the pallor of death. Stripping off his clothes, I g
him a hot soapy bath, placed ice bags on his e
until the swelling went down and he could op
them, and doctored all his other cuts and brui
with Merthiolate.

His teeth had been loosened by the boot he
of those degenerate punks, and he could eat nothi
but soups, broths and milk.

"I'm going to get back at them, Lily," he cri
defensively again and again that following week
his wounds healed, and I kept repeating: "Leav
them alone, please. Haven't they done enough t
you already?"

I began to notice a bitterness in him I had no
observed before; almost malice, when he had bee
so kind, so considerate, so warm and filled wit
passion. He sank into long silences, saying absolutely
nothing to me, even when I spoke to him, asked
him a number of questions, just lay there on the
bed smoking, watching with bloodshot eyes any-
thing, however bad, that happened to be on T.V.
Something gnawed beneath the surface of his being,
something deeper than his wife, the death of his
son, the ferocious punks who had tried to beat him
up. He seemed in another world, one which he kept
to himself alone, and would not even allow my
intrusion within it, not even for a moment. Always
on edge, he began to snap me up, gave me orders,
kept me constantly busy doing a myriad of trivial
things for him, lighting his cigarettes, bringing him

ice water, cold drinks, fussing over the quilts at night, tucking in his feet, examining his cuts and bruises a hundred times a day, shaving, bathing him.

Though I loved doing small things for him, he seemed not to appreciate them in the least, and regarded me as a nurse, or a housekeeper to do his bidding, to run when he gave a command, to give my undivided attention to his health and well-being.

But during his convalescence, although he spoke sharply to me, kept me busy both day and night, never showed me the slightest affection, it was during that time—a time without hour or day—that I really fell in love with him. At night, during the long dark hours of his recovery, he would get chills, high fever, and I had to stand watch over him constantly to see that he did not get uncovered and chilled. Then, automatically, he would burn up, flinging the covers aside, his writhing body wet with sweat, his face pale, wan, his eyes imploringly on mine. I had heard before that it was a habit with nurses to fall in love with their patients, and I understood this fully now. It is so easy to love a man when he is flat on his back, and must look to you for his every need, his every desire. I fussed over him constantly, wore out my body and my nerves fighting desperately for him to get well, to be both doctor and nurse for him, because he forbade me to call a doctor. I slept little or any at night, fearful he would go into one of his chills or that his body temperature would rise dangerously high. I neglect-

ed my own health so that his might be regain never eating enough, never relaxing complete The apartment went sorely undone, and I neglect my professional work until it began to pile up. publishers had already called me several times cause I had not made my deadlines on my man scripts, my cover art, and my bylines for back page Clients, many old and good ones, became disa pointed in me when I failed to show up to re- their homes, and they began to quit calling aft two or three times. The new ones I had made ra the gauntlet with their patience, becoming rude an obnoxious, turning to other decorators in view my negligence.

I was drawn to Jesse's bedside, fulfilling hi whims, which were numerous; and when he wa able to rise and walk about the apartment he wa like a lion in a cage, frantic to get out on the night to rejoin his comrades under the neon lights, in those caverns and poolhalls and honkytonks which were his life.

At first, mostly by my constant insistence, we would venture out together, with him wearing sunglasses to help hide his wounds and scars, taking the convertible and riding to Howell golf course, to the city park lake at L.S.U., to the Baton Rouge country club, to False river where we fished in the remote regions north of Oscar. Sometimes, on warm days, I would pack a lunch, and we would drive over to the Marksville Indian Park, to Opelousas

to see the antebellum homes, and down west side of the river to Plaquemine. On several occasions we would take the motor and rough it down to New Orleans and spend the night, touring Pontchartrain beach, city park, the Delgado art museum, and at night into the Vieux Carre.

His interest in such worthwhile, arty things lagged miserably. Though I tried to spark his interest in things other than the streets, nightlife, the shanty honkytonks along the Goldcoast in Port Allen, my offerings were nothing but dead sea fruit for him to chew. He became bored to distraction, and he began to show it verbally, instead of by polite silence. Drinking and dancing and fighting seemed to be the mainsprings of his life, his very existence, and everything else about the world washed over him in an invisible wave.

"You just don't like my company," I remarked to him tiredly late one evening after we had returned to my apartment, having gone to Clinton where they were busy filming "Hurry Sundown." I knew one of the cameramen from a previous movie they had made locally, "Band of Angels," I believe, and had an idea that Jesse would like to try his hand at acting, especially when he had expressed his ambitions along this line, mainly to show off his fine physique, his good looks, I imagined.

"It's not that I don't like you, Lily," he said, giving an ill timed excuse. "But I just want to get out alone sometimes. Can't you understand that?

I hate being cooped up here all the time in th rathole, never seeing anyone I know, never goin to the places I like to go. I like to get out, be free.

"You're tired of me," I said, and with rightfu bitterness. I had been on the paying end, holdin the purse-strings, and along with that I was goin out in every conceivable way to make him happy to pull him out of the gutter, to teach him, mak something of him, and he was contributing nothin in return.

He slammed his cigarette into the ashtray. I missed, rolled onto the carpet, burning a long brown stain.

"All you want to do is fuck. Hell, Lily, a man likes to do something else once in awhile."

"What?" I cried back, annoyed, my every nerve stung.

"Maybe I'd like to see my wife, take some flowers to my baby's grave. Is that asking too much?"

"No," I replied, letting out the strings of our love, our companionship to the fullest length. "Tell me what you want to do and we'll do it."

He grunted, stared into the dead glass panel of the T.V. set, as if it was on. He got up, went to the living room window, stared down at the river, the docks, the foreign ships moving lazily upstream.

"Not we, me," he said at last, as a hollow emptiness tapped the core of my heart.

I went to the window then, and stared down at the river, thought how lonely it looked there in the

sunset light, the haunting bellow of the ship's whistles making me all the more lonely, afraid.

"You can go places alone, Jesse," I agreed finally, giving in to him completely. I wanted most his happiness and, even though I was not that completely unselfish type, who gave all in exchange for nothing but a love excuse, I was willing to compromise. After all, it was he who needed help, someone to guide him, and not me.

"Can I take the car?" he asked, not looking at me.

"Of course," I answered, thinking the agreement a harmless one.

"Thanks, Lily," he whispered then, his scars now almost gone, his new, good-looking self smiling down at me, and he pointed an accusing finger in mock deviltry. "See how you do me." We both laughed softly, and he kissed me warmly on the side of my lips, as I jokingly complained that it was grandma fashion.

"See you at suppertime," he said, taking the keys and bounding gaily down the steps.

Though I did not worry up until that time, I began to be concerned by nine o'clock. He didn't come in that night at all, nor the next day, nor the next night. I became frantic. I went about the apartment like a wild woman, wringing my hands. I almost went insane. I couldn't keep my mind on my work. I couldn't think. Nothing had the clarity of sanity. My heart raced. Knots formed in the pit of my

stomach, rolled so that I almost could feel the
I developed a maddening headache. Sweat popp
out on my forehead, under my armpits. My han
got clammy, as pictures made themselves horrib
real in my mind, scenes of him lying in bed wi
another guy, doing to him the tantalizing things h
did to me. I went slowly mad. Had he bee
wrecked? Had he gotten into another fight? Wa
he in the hospital? In jail? All these wearisom
thoughts pounded against my brain, tormented me
all but drove me to convulsions. And the worst on
of all: was he dead? Had those boys found him agai
drunk, and had they beaten him into unrecognition
dropping his body out on some dark, lonely bayou
as I had read about so often in the *Daily Advocate*
There was always someone's body being discovered
floating in the shallows at False river, at Bayou
Pigeon, or over at Lake Maurepas or Lac Des Alle-
mands, not to mention the upper portion along
Pontchartrain along Frenier and Madisonville.

After the fourth day I began to accept the awful
idea he might not ever come back, that I might
never see him again. I started once to call the po-
lice, inform them about my car, but fell back reluc-
tantly when I realized painfully that I had loaned
him the car in good faith. He had not stolen it. In
fact, he had never taken the smallest article from
my place, unless he had asked for it first. I would
have staked my life on it that he wouldn't steal.
So where was he then? What was he doing? Who

was he with? Was he happy or sad? Was he alive or dead?

I dressed, made a tour of the bars in the downtown section, hoping I might run into someone who might know him, someone who could ease the impatience that wracked my heart, that siphoned on every nerve.

I went first to Bruce's Lounge where I had first met him, careful to wear my best, a canary yellow with yellow feathered trim and yellow gloves.

"Yes, I've seen him, lots," said the bitchy Myrtle when I questioned her about him. "I see him all the time. Lost interest in you, Blondie?"

"Don't call me blondie!" I snapped, being as bitchy as she.

She gave me a hot-eyed look, rather a stare.

"Find him on your own then," she said coldly, her hands on her hips, her black eyes snapping. "I don't have any trouble finding him . . ." And she added, bitchier than ever, "when I want him."

"I bet that's often," I said, shrugging, as I picked up my handbag and left.

"Try the whorehouse out on one-ninety," she shouted to me as I went out the door, bringing on a roar of laughter.

I went white at that remark I know, and my knees shook so that I could hardly walk. Next I tried the Paree, where he and I had gone one night, then the Roman Room, and last the Mirror Room, which I did not like, since I had heard rumors about its

clientele from Jesse. "It's for lesbians," he had said, flipping his wrist playfully.

There was another beautiful bar though, decorated completely in mirrors and glittering silver drapes. Even the carpet was sprinkled with silver confetti, and the luminous glow of the ceiling lent to its appearance that of a scene out of fairyland, which it was. I went to the bar, a little reluctantly, where a good-looking woman behind its ebony surface was reprimanding a ratty, toothless kid with jet black hair and skin the color of lava.

"I've told you time and time again, Rono. You can't hustle drinks in this bar. It scares away the customers."

"Okay, okay," the boy cried back. "Don't get hot at me."

I had heard Jesse mention someone by the name of Rono, so when I bought my drink I asked him if he had seen Jesse.

"I saw him the other night, *lady*," he answered, moving in close to me. "Driving a Thunderbird convertible like a bat out of hell. Is that your car?"

I nodded that it was. "Which direction was he going?" I asked, as if that made any difference.

"Said he was going to Amite," he answered, glancing with hungry eyes at my drink. "You're taking your life in your own hands when you ride with him, especially when he's drunk."

I began to tremble. "Was he drunk?"

Rono laughed. "He stays drunk," he said, then

his expression dulled, as if afraid to speak more. "Don't tell him I'm telling you this, but if I was you I wouldn't loan him my car. He's going to get himself and maybe somebody else killed. When he gets to drinking and fighting and has his wife on his mind, there ain't no telling what he'll do. And she stays on his mind half the time. If you want him alive, it would be wise not to let him have the car. He's bad enough on that motor, guns hell out of it, and it's brand new. Reckless as all get out." He shook his head slowly, his expression deeply serious. "Jesse is a purty good ole boy, until he gets to drinking, then you can't do a thing with him."

"I'm trying to talk him out of drinking," I said, feeling a little bit better talking to someone who knew him. "I talk to him by the hour on the way to live, staying sober. He's a wonderful person when he's not drinking, kind, considerate. You couldn't ask for a nicer man to be with."

"Yes, I know," Rono said, still shaking his head. "I've talked to him, too, but once he's out of your sight he goes and does just as he pleases."

"Just like all hustlers," said a man who sat next to where Rono was standing, his face sagging like melted wax, his pale blue eyes piercing, stabbing, his delicately ringed fingers making wide arcs when he talked, his cigarette, thrust into a long, sequined holder, making curling wreaths of blue smoke as it followed his swishing hands. "You can't trust one

no more than you can put faith in one of th convicts at Angola. They'll ruin you. I know. Th natty male bitches sure have run me through t mill."

I thought he looked it too and, surprised by wh he said, I came swiftly to Jesse's defense. "He's n a hustler, mister, he's just my boy friend."

He and Rono laughed a disbelieving laugh. "N a hustler," the man spat back, turning pale ey on me, eyes that looked like hot glass in this dar smoke haunted lounge. "Dear, my poor dear, ar you the naive one? He hustled you out of your ca didn't he? And I imagine a lot of other valuabl things. That's why you're in here looking for him for hustlers frequent these premises daily, and nightly, and around the clock, if you know what I mean."

"No, I don't know what you mean," I cried, giving him a cold stare. "Jesse doesn't come to bars . . . bars like this."

They both laughed again.

"Oh, he doesn't does he!" the man replied, his falsetto voice rising to a ridiculous pitch. "My dear misinformed beauty. If you'll pardon the expression, they'll drop their drawers to a lover as soon as they will to a stranger. Makes no difference, since it's all for money. They simply make me sick. And they are all the same, cut from the same piece of rotten shit, whether they ride a motorcycle, a racing car, a football star, wear tough leather jackets and boots,

making it like a real he-man, they're all the same. Talking about mixed up. The hustlers in this mangy town are more mixed up than the gays. At least a gay knows what he wants, and a hustler never knows what he wants really. Sick! Sick! Sick! God! and I thought I had tricked them all. So long as you hand him out ready cash, clothes, your car. You stop doing that then see how quick he drops you. I bet he'd even drop you for a woman, if a woman offered him more."

I left the lounge in a flurry of emotions. I just couldn't—I wouldn't believe, refused to believe that Jesse was like that. That old man was nothing but a silly drunk, spouting off his mouth, as if he knew it all.

Jesse! my heart cried again and again, frantically, blinding me with tears. Jesse! Where was Jesse!

Winter was coming on, and I had always hated winter. So had Jesse, and as I turned into the wrought-iron gates and into the patio the leaves were falling like rain, and there was a dark overcast to the sky, and geese were honking their way southward.

At the steps leading to my apartment I suddenly stopped, clutched at my heart as a sharp pain stabbed my side.

His motorcycle was missing!

At the sight of that empty place beside the stair rail I went sick inside. I knew what that shiny instrument meant to Jesse. And even if he did have

my car, was off probably with another guy, mayb in bed with him, my thought now, and my onl concern, was to get it safely back for him. Automa tically I linked its missing to those deplorable punk who had tried to beat him so mercilessly, and, run ning up the stairs, I immediately called the police.

Now, there was nothing I could do but wait and hope. Another worry to add further to my overwrought nerves, my misery. I paced the floor. A hundred times I picked up a pencil, started to lay out a floor scene on my drawing board, then tossed it aside. A hundred times I went to my type-writing desk, stuck a clean sheet of paper into my typewriter, sat there for half an hour, my mind blank, then ripped out the paper, tossed it into the wastepaper basket. That night I lay on my bed in a pool of sweat, my head throbbing ceaselessly, my stomach twitching into hard knots. The next morn-ing the police informed me that they had found the motorcycle. It had been dragged no more than a block from my apartment, in between two buildings near the capitol. It had been stripped. The back wheel, the battery, the chain, the buddy foot rests, the gas tank cap, the spark plugs, the front light.

I became physically sick when I saw it there sunken in the grass like a dead animal with its back broken, and I knew that Jesse would be even sicker than I if he saw it in this sad condition. Immediately I called Gonzales' repair shop and had it trucked in, and requested of the manager that he repair it

as soon as possible. I walked back to my apartment through a misty rain, not caring any longer, my heart having ached until it could ache no more. I felt numb, thawed of my old torments, my impatient desperation. I took a hot shower, fixed my hair, made a sandwich and hot cocoa, and sat down to write on my book. I was doing a novel on the Mississippi Indians, and I had patterned the Indian hero after Jesse. So writing about him made me miss him a little less, and to consider him in a more attractive light than that of drinking and fighting and gulling me. I also described his body vividly, and this too dulled the pain in my heart and lifted the worry from my mind.

I was still typing at eleven that night when I heard his key in the lock. He came in very slowly. He had worn his canary yellow sports coat, a wine-colored shirt and black slacks, and they looked as if he had slept in them for a week. His dark hair was in wind blown tangles, and he looked weary about the eyes, his expression that of strain, of fatigue. He came to the bedroom door, parted the wooden beads strung on cords, and just stood looking at me.

"See how you do me?" he said then, smiling a faint, tired smile. His eyes looked tired too, but they tried to twinkle, and rising, I went to him and smiled back. I was so glad to see him I wanted to hug his neck, to hold him forever and never again allow him to leave my apartment. And I was angry

with him too for going off for days without returning, and me not knowing where he was, who he was with, not even bothering to call.

"Jesse, where have you been?" I asked simply, my heart in my throat.

"Oh, here and there," he said, nonchalantly, as if he had done no more than take a walk around the block.

"Oh, where?" I cried, annoyed almost to the point of tears.

He gave me a cynical look, went to the closet and hung up his coat.

"To my brother's at Amite," he finally said, and so cool. Too cool to suit me.

"You're lying," I flung back. "You've been with some man."

He grinned a nasty grin, which made me want to slap him.

"What's wrong, Lily, you not getting enough of my big dick?"

His voice, his tone, more than his words shocked me.

"You know I care for you more than just for that."

"That's all you think about, Lily," he said, lighting a cigarette and switching on the T.V. "My big dick in your hot asshole. You're just jealous."

Angrily I switched off the T.V. before it could warm up.

"But you've had my car for days, Jesse. I've been worried. How did I know whether something might

have happened, that you were in the hospital, or in jail. I couldn't call the police, for they'd think you had stolen it. I've been worried to death."

He grinned, puffed madly on his cigarette, as if he wanted to disappear under its cloud of smoke.

"But nothing did happen, did it, Lily?"

"But I was still worried! You might have called, at least!"

He stared absently across the room.

"Hell, Lily, you wasn't worried about the car. You know I drive safe. All you're worried about is this beautiful dick of mine, afraid some other guy is going to get it and not you."

"Or some woman!" I flung back, before I thought.

Instantly, and with the agility of an animal, he leaped from the bed, slapped me full across the face. The sound rang in the still room, as I reeled back, saw a million stars.

"You fucking bitch!" he cried. "You bug hell out of me!"

"I just want us to be together," I said tearfully, when I had recovered from the shock of his blow.

"That's all you want, you bitch!" he shouted, his hands out wide, his palms up. "Lying here, day in and day out, fucking you around the clock. I hate being cooped up in this dump. I want to get out, get some fresh air. I want to do something but lay naked all the time, you pawing me, kissing me all over, playing around with me. You irritate the hell outa me!"

"Then why don't you leave?" I cried, going around the bed to where he stood glaring at me. "Why don't you find someone else who will give you money, clothes, a car, jewelry, anything you want?"

"Huh, don't you think I can't. I know plenty of people in this town who would be glad to pay for me. There's a lot of rooms in this town, Lily, and in them rooms there is always a bed, and in each bed usually a man. I can make out. People are lucky to pay me."

"Like that first night I met you," I said coldly, wanting to hurt him as he had hurt me. "They were sure clamoring to pay for you that night, weren't they?"

"You're jealous of everything, Lily. My lips, my body, my dick, my balls, jealous of every minute I'm not with you, thinking I am fucking someone else, jealous even of the air I breathe, even if someone sits beside me, talks to me. You're jealous of everything. Why, even my wife didn't keep tabs on me like you do."

"Maybe that's why you lost her," I flung back hotly.

"What do you mean?"

"Neglect, Jesse. Taking her for granted, as you take me for granted."

"Shit! All you do is bitch, nag! nag! nag!" He jerked a jacket out of the closet. "I'm going riding. See you round, maybe."

He rushed like a flash to the front door. It was then that I told him about the motorcycle.

He dropped his hand from the doorknob, turned slowly and looked at me, his lower jaw dropped.

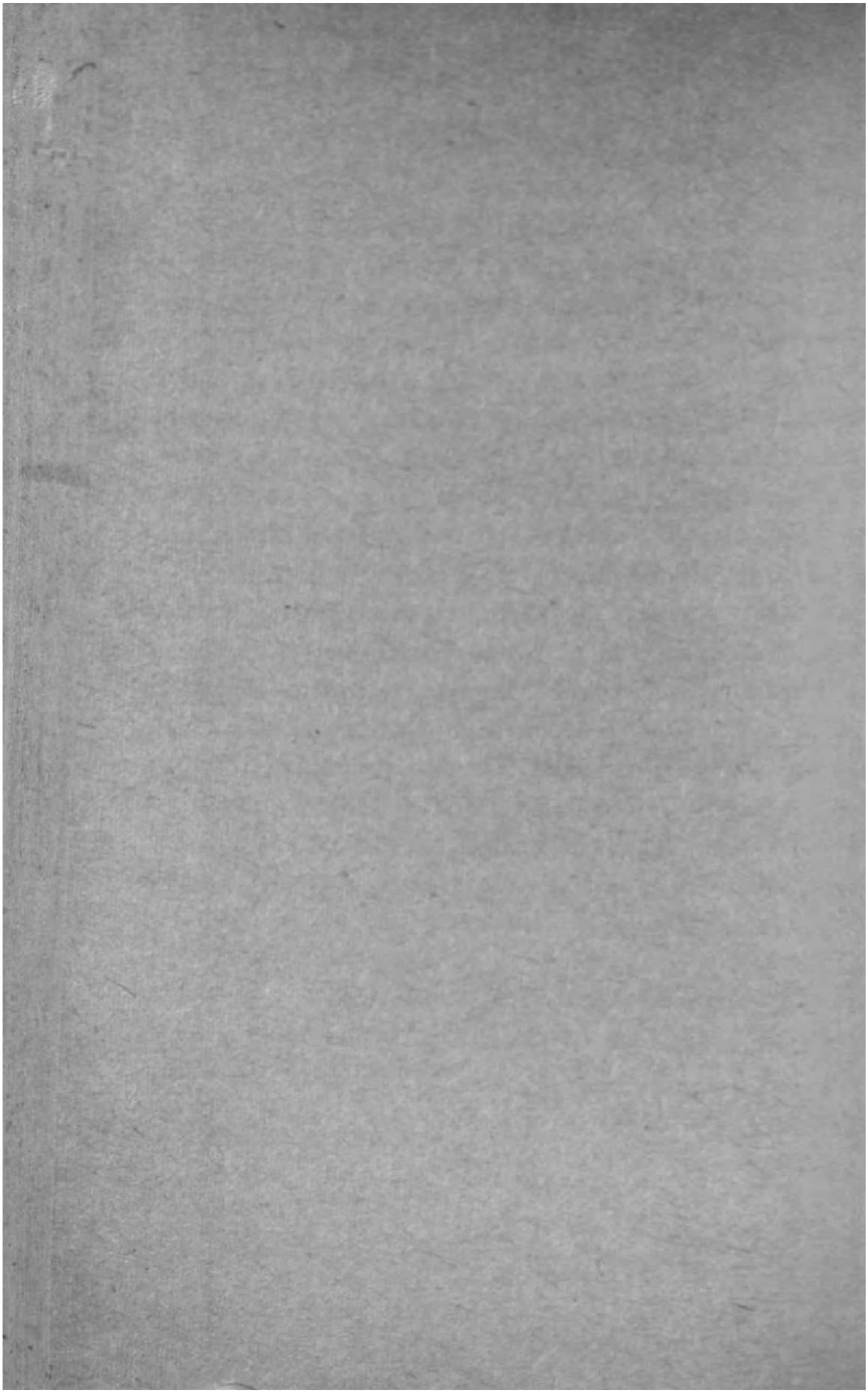
"They did all that," he said, his brow a furrow of wrinkles.

"I bet it was those boys who tried to beat you up at the Riviera," I said, as the heat of my anger cooled. I saw he was hurt by it, and his sad, little boy look melted my heart.

"Lily," he said then, his voice filled with its usual passion. "Will you pay for my motor being fixed?"

"I've already seen to that," I said, proud that I was doing something to make him happy.

"I'm sorry we fussed," he said, coming directly to me and sweeping me into his arms. And kissing me warmly on the mouth, he said jokingly, dreamily: "See how you do me?" And added playfully, squeezing me tightly: "You little bitch."



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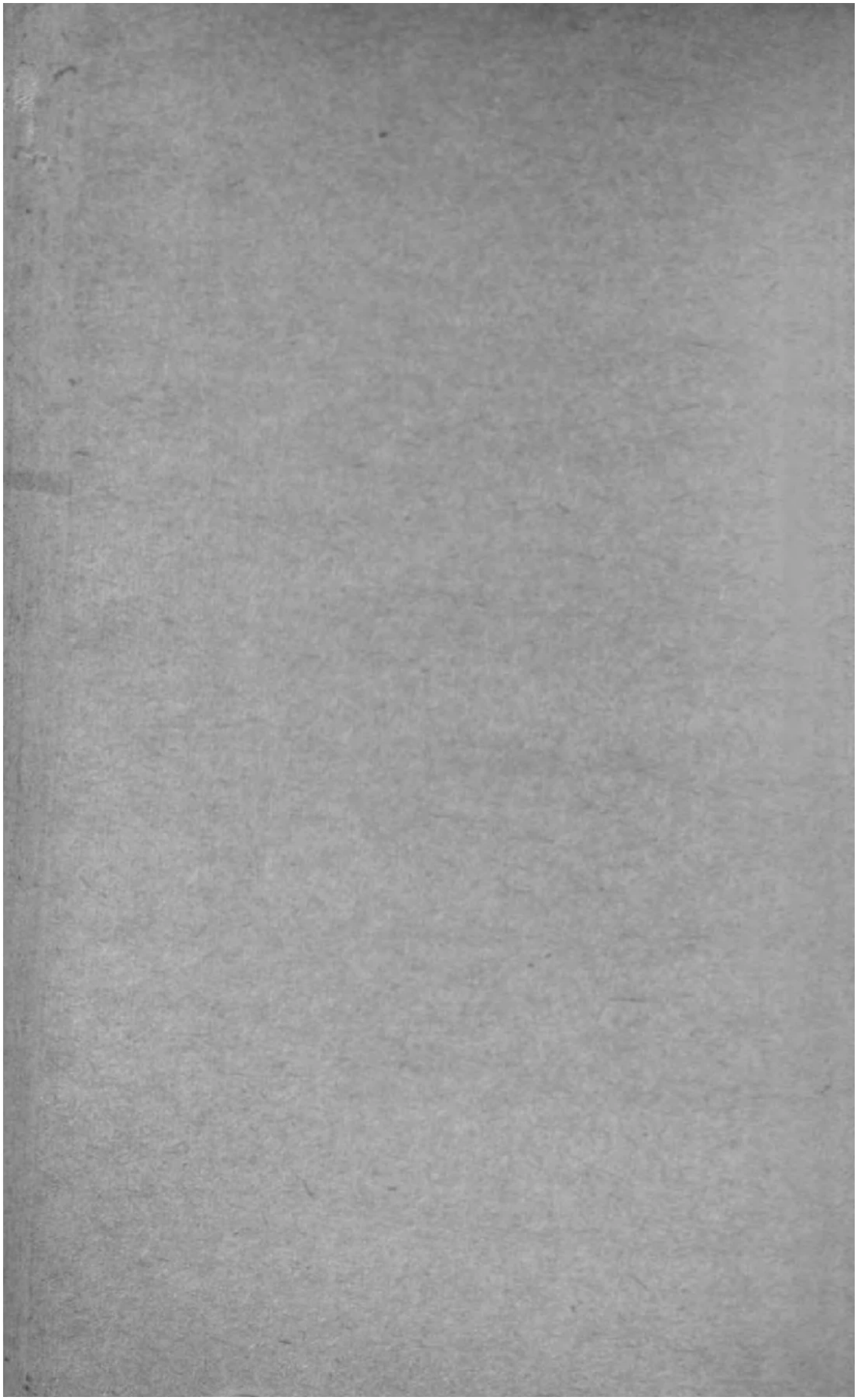

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Because Jesse's personality was stronger than mine, because he was so purely physical, because the fiber of his mind was keener, more spiced with cunning, because he was basically more lustful, wistful, and harder within, he ran rampant over my emotions, using my deep and abiding love for him as a foil to get what he wanted.

Having gotten away with that first incident with my car, having his motorcycle repaired so effortlessly, Jesse began doing just as he pleased, and whenever he pleased, setting his own schedule, his own hours for departure and return.

It drove me mad.

He would leave at any hour of the day or night, explaining with any gullible excuse he could drum

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up, or no excuse whatsoever.

"I don't tell anybody what they can do, and don't want anybody telling me what to do," he size up in one phrase his inner philosophy. "They d what they please. I do what I please."

And he did just that. No matter what guile employed, no matter how much I pleaded, begged and planned, he went when the urge came.

"I'll give you the dick when I get back," he woul say, as if that was all I wanted, all I cared about I would take him at his word, and sometimes i would be a week before he returned, with no expla nation where he had been, who he was with, o what he had been doing. And he always returne dishevelled, worn, tired, filthy. And many times no wearing the clothes he had left with, but someone else's, leaving his clothes, the good ones I had bought him, in exchange for worn out jeans, torn and faded shirts. I needed a hired hand employed especially just to keep up with his things, see that they were properly laundered, cleaned, hung in their rightful places.

He lived with litter, there was absolutely no ti diness in his makeup. Things seemed to break in his presence. Clothes became damaged without in cident, buttons torn off, zippers that would not zip shoes and boots that were never shined, shirts and slacks torn and ripped for no reason, no purpose. Discord was his creed, and no one could have lived up to it as he did. Cigarettes fell out of trays. His

place at the table looked like the eating place of a blood hound, caps and bottle tops were left unscrewed in the bathroom, towels and wash cloths were used to wipe away shoe polish, rings remained around the bath tub, faucets were left dripping, and soiled clothes were left where he pulled them off. A blind man could have followed his trail, and he seemed to take impish pleasure in doing everything he knew I disliked.

Yet, despite his lack of law and order in things, despite his childishness and waywardness, I think the qualities he lacked made me love him, want him more. His very indifference to me made me want him with an impatient exasperation. His lack of neatness was the exact opposite to my orderliness and this hurry-scurry attitude of his, this boisterous demeanor, this robustness of spirit, of zest, made inroads into my weary emotions, demanding of my spirit everything which fatigued me more, drawing on my patience until my every nerve was flayed, then, when he had me so roiled in emotion, so keyed with strain and weariness, he would toss me on the bed, rip away my clothes, and take me in a welter of wild passion.

Too, now that he had all the money he needed, he drank more, and the drinking kept him out in the open, in the jungle of the streets, bar-hopping, whiling his days away at playing pool, his nights with loose women and fighting.

He became cock of the walk; a new motorcycle

to ride in good weather, a Thunderbird convertible in bad, or whenever he wanted, beautiful clothes jewelry, money, all the things his degenerate hustler friends wanted with a violent desperation but could not have. They envied him, and they hated him in a fashion. Yet they remained his companions brothers under the skin, their loyalty like the honor among thieves. Too, I think they feared him. He was a fighter, and they had seen him leave a fight the winner, his opponent out cold, often enough to respect that title.

He was a fighter, a lover, and one of the hardest, healthiest male specimens I had ever seen. He was kind, loyal, affectionate when he wanted to be and as aloof, as cold as a lizard the next instant after passion if he so chose. Sober, always considerate, drunk, a little malicious, uncertain of his emotions, prankish to the point of danger, reckless, and dangerous, so dangerous!

There were times, times when that certain siren song lured him into the city, the streets, the night-life; going off on his motorcycle in the cold, the rain, when I felt I could endure him no longer, the horrid imposition he forced on my life . . . those long, awesome hours of waiting out his return, the worry of not knowing what he was doing when he was not with me, who he was with . . . was he sick or well? In jail or dead? Then I truly wanted to leave him.

But each time he went away, staying for days,

he would return and would be so maddeningly warm, so lovable, always kidding with "see how you do me," that I would melt in his arms, forgive him anything.

Whatever he did, however he worried me, how slack then became his devotion to me, I remained loyal to him. I never went out unless with him, kept to my work, completing my novel and throwing myself immediately into another one.

Yet, as the days wore on, some of them gay, festive, some of them adorned with the beauty of his love, his savage lovemaking, some of them saddened by his crying spells and talking about his wife, his dead baby son, the season of holidays came in, and I knew I would have to leave him for awhile.

Thanksgiving approached, warm sunny days blending moodily into a hard cold spell, and since that Sunday night before that holiday Thursday, Jesse had been missing, having strayed on his motorcycle from the warm, heavenly fold I had tried to provide. He was to go downtown to pick up a carton of cigarettes and the evening News, and now, on Wednesday morning he still had not come in. I was in agony. I wanted him to keep the apartment while I drove out of town to visit some of my kin, and I wanted to give him enough money to tide him over until I returned that following Sunday. I wrung my hands. I wept. I developed a splitting headache from so much worry no amount of aspirins would ease it. I packed my clothes, unpacked, then

packed them again. I tried to read. One of n
novels had come in from the publisher. I thumb
through it sparingly, loathing some of my deathle
prose. Everything became tasteless, saltless food.
couldn't eat. I couldn't think, and when I did thin
it was about him; wondering if he were with anothe
guy. And visions tormented me—visions of him lyin
naked in bed with him, doing to him the man
wondrous, exciting things he did to me.

I was to leave that Wednesday morning aroun
six. I put it off, hoping he would return before
left, hoping he would return in time to have a se
round with him in bed, his going away present to
me, but he didn't show up. I sat beside the phone,
waited, cried up to the last desperate minute. At
noon I put my suitcase in the car and drove out
north on Highway 67 heading for Mississippi. When
I had gone through Scotlandville and was passing
Leland College I saw him driving up behind me
through my rearview mirror. He was motioning for
me to slow down and stop. When I did, he drove
his motor around to the side of the car and I rolled
down the window.

"See how you do me," he cried, laughing a hearty
laugh, but I was too weary of mind to follow on
the tide of his emotions.

"I've been so worried, Jesse," I said, so glad to
see him alive that I was almost to the point of tears.
"Where have you been?"

"Been fucking a couple of blondes," he answered,

with tongue in cheek.

"Good," I said, trying not to be mad, for I realized he was joking. "I want you to be happy."

"Shit, Lily," he said, laughing. "You'd die if I fucked another guy, and you know it."

"Maybe," I replied, not really knowing just how I would ever manage to live through it. "But truly, where have you been this time? It is important to me, Jesse, and I want to know . . . the truth, before I go home to my folks and worry myself out of a good time."

He looked away at the woods in their gaudy autumn colors, then down at the dark, grey pavement, as if deeply ashamed of what he had done and not wanting me to know it.

"I've been in jail, Lily," he answered finally.

"What for?"

"Some traffic tickets, and driving while drunk."

I gave him a surprised look.

"You drove that while you were drunk?"

He nodded, gripping the handlebars with a firm grip.

"You're going to get killed someday on that thing," I said to him, fearing the worst.

"Maybe it'll be the best thing that ever happened to me," he murmured sadly, squinting at the sun.

"What makes you say that?"

"Nothing to live for. Nobody loves me."

"I love you, Jesse."

"I know that," he whispered casually, as if it

meant nothing to him. "I mean . . . I mean my wife."

"If you love her so much, why don't you try and get her back?"

"She won't have me. That's why I get so drunk all the time, Lily. Don't care anymore. If I can't have her I want to get drunk, want to get in jail, want to die. For without her there is nothing to live for, nothing."

"You're taking the wrong attitude about this," I said, feeling so sorry for him that the agony reached down to my toes. I looked at him then, noticing his features, harsh in the glaring light of the sun. He was so pale, so drawn, looked so tired. Purple lines underscored his bloodshot eyes, glowed along his brow where he had been cut, the wound still not quite healed. His hair was dirty, unkempt, needed combing, and the scars from other fights, made themselves vividly evident in the intensified light. I noticed his hands, too, which held the cycle in check. They were dirty, gnarled, like an old man's, and they trembled oddly, almost weakly.

Reaching in my purse I withdrew some bills and thrust them into his hands.

"I hate to keep taking money from you, Lily," he said, almost in tears.

"Take it," I said. "Go to the apartment. Clean up. Rest. You need it, Jesse, really. You're trying to kill yourself—out all night, every night, a slow suicide. What are you trying to prove to yourself?

What's out there in the darkness that is so important that you keep searching for it day after day, night after night?"

"I don't know," he muttered, half under his breath. "Death, I guess. Maybe that's what I want to find . . . death."

"You sound so morbid, Jesse," I whispered, thinking sadly how I could go on and live without him if something like that happened. "We're all going to die soon enough, without talking about it or wishing it. You have everything to live for. You're young, handsome, keen of mind."

"I don't have Jackie," he said, and it brought us to silence.

We just sat there for an infinite time saying nothing, our minds glued to the past, what the immediate future would bring, and even then, even though we were discussing death, I had no inkling that I would see him just a little while longer, alive.

"I've got to go now, baby," I whispered, leaning my head out of the car as he bent over his cycle and kissed me affectionately. "See you Sunday evening."

I did see him Sunday evening . . . drunk! He was sprawled in a dishevelled heap in the middle of my bed, his clothes still on, rumpled, soiled with mud, his face and arms bruised from another fight. All the lights were ablaze, the radio and T.V. on, a faucet running, the kitchen littered with food, the carpet, the chairs, the divans heaped with dirty

clothes.

"Jesse, baby, I'm home," I said, sitting down on the bed beside him, brushing back his unruly hair. I was so glad to see him that tears of joy welled up in my eyes.

"So? So what, you're home," was all he said, and this without affection, any sign of love.

I knew then that this had to end. That he had to give up drinking, his life in the streets, his homage to every honkytonk on the gold coast, or else something dreadful was going to happen. I was beginning to feel it. A dark shadow seemed to hang over our world, following us wherever we went, haunting us by day, a nightmare in our sleep. I had tried everything, and nothing had worked. I had tried talk, clothes, the car, money; had tried to make him into something grand, noble, something he wasn't. I saw that now. He was something else. He was not what I had dreamed he was. He was not the male Cinderella I had lifted up from the bed of ashes. His past was too strong for him to change, to fit into my ways. That was why he kept running back into the alleys of the night, seeking his counterparts, those like himself, his gaudy, filthy brothers of the night.

I was losing him, and the fact tore its way through my bleeding heart. I was losing him like sand sifting through my fingers, unless I did something for him, and quickly.

They were still in the process of filming "Hurry

Sundown" and I had read in the local papers that they were seeking rural talent to play the part of roughnecks in several fight scenes. I figured Jesse would like that, so I paid a visit to the cameraman I had known for several years. A great number of movies had been filmed in Louisiana, partially due to its ideal climate, its wealth of pastoral landscapes and antebellum homes. And it was said that it was the only state in the South which listed actors in its unemployment agencies.

"If you'll just try and go straight," I said to Jesse, when I had already lined up an interview for him. "If only you'll stop your drinking, running around these honkytonks at night, I'll get you a part in the movie, not a big part, but one you'll like."

He was elated.

"I promise you I'll never drink again," he said, eager as a child. "If you will give me this start, put me back on my feet."

The morning of the interview I gave him a hundred dollars to buy clothes, and asked him to meet me and the director on the set at three that afternoon. They were in the process of filming in an area directly south of L.S.U. campus, so I let him use the car.

He didn't show.

"Well, looks like your handsome Adonis is already possessed of the temperament of show people," said the director, who did not appear too disappointed. "Late for work—the privilege for veteran actors

only. What's the matter . . . he too good for us?"

I couldn't answer. I returned to the apartment sick in both heart and mind. Nothing was ever going to work with Jesse and me. And I loved him so desperately, and wanted to keep him for my very own. He was slipping away from me by the hour, and I fought this with desperation and with a hollow desolation in my heart. I realized my body, my sex, even my love wasn't enough to hold him. Jackie had him bottled up, his body, his love, even his soul.

He was nothing but a shell without her. He was all the things he was because of her, all the things he wasn't because of her. He had become what he was now, too, because he had lost her. He was no longer a man with a man's reason and logic. He was but beauty walking in mystery and misery, doomed by his great undying love for his wife.

I didn't stand a chance. I knew that now. I had never stood a chance, and as I went home that cold, wintery day I looked back over it all, saw how he had used me, how I had become a foil he had applied to a purpose, his own desperate purpose. I had been the cure for his kind of sickness. I had been easy to use for I was easy to love. I had gone to him with a lonely, broken heart; loving him because he was alone, lonely in a dark forbidding world, and also with a broken marriage, a broken world. And he had taken my love and my loneliness, mixing it with his loneliness, and all the taken-for-granted beauty of our relationship had become a

dirty, profane thing.

Yet I still loved him to distraction. And I still wanted him, as he was, drunken or not, a hustler or not, a man or not. I still wanted him, even though now I had only the frailest hope of pulling him out of the gutter, out of the mire and the darkness and into the light of new ways, new dreams.

The apartment seemed so empty, so forlorn when I went in, an almost forbidding place and, flinging myself on the enormous bed, I cried like a child.

Late that night he came in. I could hear him fumbling with the lock and I knew he had been drinking. I sat up in bed, waiting with my heart in my throat until he felt his way through the dark living room and into the bedroom where I had turned on the red bedside lamps.

"See how you do me?" he muttered drunkenly, as he stumbled around the bed to where I sat up, looking angrily at him. Then, as if by sleight of hand he withdrew a pistol from his hip, flipped back the safety catch. I almost leaped out of bed.

"Don't point that horrible thing at me!" I cried, frantically. I pulled the spread up around me, all the way to my chin, as if it would protect me.

He laughed a loud, gruesome laugh, and did just the opposite of what I asked. He pointed the pistol directly at my head.

"Do you love me, Lily?" he asked.

"Yes, yes, baby, I love you," I answered, my voice trembling so I could hardly get out the words.

"No you don't," he cried bitterly. "Nobody loves me. Nobody loves me."

"I do love you, baby," I muttered, moving out of range.

"I came here to kill myself, Lily," he said softly, slowly, as if he hated to say it but must. "Then maybe you . . . maybe I'll kill you."

"But why?" I cried. "Baby . . . why?"

" 'Cause nobody loves me, no fucking body loves me."

He fell across the bed, his legs sprawled, his hands behind his head, the pistol barrel pointed at his brow. He began to sob, long jerking sobs that ripped through my trembling heart, the tears in wild streams running down each side of his face. He looked so white there, his pale face against the gaudy multi-colored pillows, his hair in damp mats about his ears, his lips white, colorless, his eyes narrowed. Even the scars on his face were boldly pronounced, standing out with a vivid harshness I had never seen before.

"Baby, give me the gun," I said, trying to persuade him, fearful of every moment that he would pull the trigger, end his life, maybe mine. "We'll talk, we'll lie and talk about your wife all night if you want to. You can tell me everything. Then you'll feel better."

"Naw," he cried back, sobbing so that his whole body shook. "Don't want to talk about her. She don't love me. Nobody loves me. I'm no fucking good.

Do you hear, Lily . . . ? No fucking good."

"Yes you are, Jesse," I said, my own eyes filling with tears. And I kissed him on the cheek. "You're not what you think you are. You're just unhappy now, tonight. Tomorrow? Tomorrow you'll feel better, will want to live again."

"No fucking good, Lily," he sobbed on, his lower lip quivering, the saliva running out of the corners of his mouth. "I fucked up today, Lily, fucked up good. I wanted to go out there, honest. I wanted that part, but Jackie . . . I took a drink, got to thinking about her. She won't love me, Lily. Won't have nothing to do with me. What am I going to do, if she don't want me any more?"

"We'll go on and live," I said, and with all the meaning I could muster, my eyes watching frantically as he toyed with the cocked pistol, placing it between his eyes, under his chin, jabbed it into his stomach.

"I don't want to live," he said, choking. He sniffed like a naughty child. "I'm going to kill myself, now, on this purty bed. You don't love me, Lily. Jackie don't love me. Nobody loves me."

"Baby, please . . . please!" I begged, my heart heaving against my chest, my nerves frayed. I lifted his head, cradled him in my arms, pressed back his entangled hair. "I can't live without you, Jesse. You know that. If something happened to you I wouldn't want to live. So don't, please don't. Put up the pistol, or give it to me, before it might go off acci-

dentally."

"It scares you, don't it?" he said, and tried a vain attempt at smiling. Then he broke out in a rash of fresh tears, his face reddening now, his lips moving insanely. "Lily, Lily, are you going to write that book about me you promised you was going to write?"

I nodded, thinking now that he was really going to kill himself. He raised the pistol to his right ear.

"Tell Jackie in it that I love her, will you? So she'll know. I want her to read it, Lily, so she'll know. Promise?"

"Yes, baby, I promise," I said, sobbing too now, holding him close, hoping to never let go. "And I'll say how beautiful you are and how kind you are to me, and how happy you've made me. I'll say all that, Jesse, and more, much more, everything."

He stopped crying then, and I wiped the tears from his pale, lifeless face.

"I can't do it, Lily," he said, staring at the ceiling. "I'm a damn coward. I just can't do it." He looked around the room, as if for the last time, and this frightened me a little, even though I fell back with relief as he put the pistol back on safety. He got up, walked around the room, came back to the bed, looked down at the sunken place where he had lain.

"I'm glad . . . glad I didn't do it there," he said, his eyes gutted with agony. "Not on your bed, Lily, but somewhere else. Gotta do it somewhere else."

He wheeled then, almost falling down in his

drunkeness, and rushed round the bed to the door.

"Goodbye, Lily," he cried, as he rushed through the strung beads in the doorway.

I leaped up from the bed at the sound of that one awesome word, my heart pounding frantically, my whole body quivering with fright.

"Baby, don't go!" I half-screamed, running after him.

He stood for a moment in the middle of the living room, looked around the walls at the paintings, the statues, then ran out into the darkness. I heard the sound of his motor, the shrieking of the wheels as he roared through the courtyard and out into the street. It droned north, and I knew where he was headed. The Riviera!

I threw my canary yellow trench coat over my shoulders. I had to catch him, I knew, had to stop him before he killed himself with the pistol or the motorcycle. He was drunk! Insanely drunk! Drunk on whiskey and his love for his wife!

God! I've got to stop him!

It was all coming to a climax tonight. I could sense it, could feel it in my every throbbing nerve. Almost by premonition I knew it could not last, not like this, not this torment and agony and love's privation. It was going to affect me and Jackie and him in some kind of despairing way and, as I thought these awful things, my foot automatically pressed harder on the accelerator, my brain crying in a ferment: Hurry! Hurry!

The ever-circling wheels of birth, mating, death so all-absorbing to most women, were as nothing to me since I met Jesse. Freedom, sexual pleasures, discoveries about him, his body, his little secret additions to his wayward, forceful personality, the salvage of my pity, my love for him, my deep and beautiful love for him . . . these to me were the great realities.

I had a deeper fear, too, than most people about death and any kind of violence or pain for myself or for anyone I loved. My idea of God had always been shadowy, but now, fleeing through the night to save the only person in the world whom I truly loved, it now took the shape of a kind of omnipotent Jesse.

The night was filled with wind, whirling leaves and old newspapers and filth over the driven streets, and the dark purple clouds brooded despairingly, threatening to bring a storm. In the west, the moon hung like a watchful, piercing eye, and as my car began to take the steady rise up the long ramp of the Mississippi River bridge, I could see Jesse far up ahead. He had already reached the peak of the bridge now, and was going over the other side, down, down into the neon-lit goldcoast and into the crazy, debauchery which called to him, beckoned, laying its filthy hands on his life, his world, his ultimate doom.

Reaching the club, I wheeled in recklessly, throwing waves of loose gravel, and without bother-

ing to lock the car, got out. His motorcycle stood parked to one side, desolately alone. I gave it one sad look, then hurried into the club. But no sooner had I reached the door then a flood of people were flushed out like the inmates of an insane asylum. They scattered, both men and women; and screams and yells rent the air. They pushed and shoved me out of the way, the girls shrieking, the men cursing. Then down the narrow red-lit hall came Jesse. He had hold of Jackie's hand, trying to drag her with him, and a squad of enraged boys was following. They reeked with drunkeness and violence, their fists clenched, their eyes like hot glass, and one of them held a long switchblade which trapped the light, gleamed eerily in the half-darkness.

At that frightening sight the breath left my lungs. One thought burned itself deep into my brain. To save Jesse! But how?

He was headed for his motor, and his wife, lagging, was pleading with him, begging him not to go.

"You're drunk, Jesse," she cried desperately, her long dark hair in wild sails about her face. "You'll kill yourself!"

"Please, baby, come with me," he was crying, the tears running in frantic streams down his face, dripping off the end of his chin.

"I won't! I won't!" she yelled back, recoiling with all the strength in her body. They struggled there in the darkness and the wind, he pulling, she resist-

ing. It was a terrible sight. Two lost people in the throes of love, both loving desperately, both battling a chaos neither understood. Wild and drunken and free, and as I stood muted to the spot, no part of this struggle now, lost to his life, his love, I felt deeply sorry for them both.

As in a boat's wake, the howling mob followed them to the motorcycle, yelling, cursing; feminine voices uplifted in hysterical screams. The punks, the same ones I recognized from that awesome, blood-drenched fight, moved in menacingly. And here they brought him to bay. They closed in on him like madmen, like howling, yelping wolves, clamorous for blood.

Amid the clapping of wild voices, the dark shapes moving like horrible shadows in the wind, fists shot out, bodies lunged crazily, in drunken frenzy, and Jesse, my beautiful Jesse, was in the middle of them. He fought like Samson, using the butt of his pistol as Samson had used the jawbone of an ass. Screams rent the wind-driven darkness, and blood gushed like tapped springs. A knife gleamed, made a wide silver arc in the moving shadows, slicing the night, as I let out a piercing scream. Like a silent arrow shot from nowhere, soundless, it buried itself in Jesse's side. He bent, dropped his weapon, clutched wildly, as the blood streamed through his long, tapering fingers, ran in red streams down his quivering leg. The knife struck again, when he was off-guard, digging into his chest like fangs, and he dropped

to one knee.

Then, as if blind to all pain, all agony, his strength becoming something like that of super-human ferocity, he leaped up, swung his fists like enormous clubs. Bone struck bone. There were dull sounding thuds, screams, yells. Bodies fell in the loose gravel, moaning, crumbled heaps of flesh and flowing blood.

With all the strength in my body slipping away, I looked at Jesse standing there in the middle, in that clearing he had made, supreme. He was in agony I know, and I longed to rush to him, to take him in my arms, to find some way to get him to safety, but I could only stand by, helpless, and see it through to the end.

For now, when it was too late, I truly loved him. Not with any love of earth, of his beautiful body: that was spoiled for me, for I saw now how desperately he loved Jackie, but with a grave amorousness of the saints. I felt for him now the passion that the Magdalen might have felt for Christ when she saw him nailed to the cross. Jesse was being crucified before my very eyes, drenched in a bloodbath of agony and violence and, like Magdalen before Christ, all I could do was stand before him and pray, for it was yet a man's world, and these desperate, violent men, crazy on drunkeness and lust, starved for the sight of blood, had already set the game.

Jesse let out agonizing moans. At first, the sounds were only a rumor, as if some evil thing, imprisoned

for the safety of the world, whined and struggled against love in a close underground cavern.

I began to sob, and I noticed that Jackie, his wife, was sobbing too.

The beaten punks, grabbing up the ones that had fallen, rushed to a car, piled in like sodden rags. The motor gunned, lights flashed crazily, as the car spun around, came to a screeching half.

One of the boys, his face smeared with blood, stuck his head out the door.

"We'll be back, Jesse, you motherfucker! With a gun!"

They were off in a rush, gravel flying, the motor straining as gears shifted, as metal ate against metal.

"I'll get them! I'll get them!" Jesse half-screamed, reeling drunkenly, having lost a lot of blood. He stumbled to his motor, straddled it.

Simultaneously Jackie and I rushed to his side, clung to him, begging him not to go off in his condition.

"Please, Jesse!" I cried, holding to his hand which gripped the bars in a steel-like grip. "You'll hurt yourself, maybe get killed, kill someone else!"

He flung out an arm venomously, shoved me backwards. I fell into the loose gravel. His motor racketed wildly, like a bellowing animal. He flipped on the orange-red lights, shot out of the parking area like a demon out of hell, with Jackie running after him. He roared onto the highway, sped east in the direction the car loaded with punks had gone.

Jackie fell in a heap on the gravel, sobbing bitterly. The night wind, playing havoc now, mixed with sand and filth, roamed through her long dark hair, lifted each strand until it was a mass of darkness, wild as her nerves and her grieving heart.

I ran to her, lifted her up by the shoulders. Her face was streaked with dirt, and the tears had stained her cheeks with mud.

"I gotta catch him!" she sobbed, over and over, her eyes on mine wild, frantic, torn with livid agony. "I gotta save him! I just gotta!"

"Come, honey," I said in a pleading voice, urgent, as time was running out for us both. "We'll go in my car."

Willingly, obediently she rose and I helped her into the front seat and slammed the door. Nervously I fumbled with the keys, shaking all over, my one distracted motive . . . to save Jesse if I could.

We hurried down the highway in silence, she with muffled, broken sobs, her face buried in her hands, her long hair in dark tangles, I with the muted obstinacy to keep my head, to remain as calm as my dishevelled nerves would allow, as my every emotion, every vein and muscle stood to the ready, heightened and sharpened by the role I must play, if I were to save Jesse at all.

And as we went, the wheels revolving monotonously, one word beat itself into my mind: Jesse . . . Jesse . . . Jesse.

Whatever Jackie and I had been in the past,

rivals, enemies of a nature, we were friends momentarily, loving the same man and, in loving him to distraction, our one aim was to save him. If we had been jealous of one another, we were no longer, not now, not tonight. For Jesse's sake we had signed a silent truce. We both loved him, adored him, and one understood the other's feelings. We knew what agonies burned in the other's heart, and that made us for the moment closer than any friends.

Careful to keep Jesse and his cycle in sight, even though a number of cars kept weaving in and out between him, I grew alarmed when he turned off on a side street heading south into Port Allen, and not following the route over the bridge and back into Baton Rouge.

"He's following them," said his wife, when I mentioned it nervously to her. "There'll be another fight, when he catches them."

I went faint at this, and pressed harder on the accelerator.

I was gaining on him finally, and my heart eased somewhat its rapid pounding, but beat again with greater intensity when I saw that he turned again left, taking the middle span of the recently constructed approach to the new Mississippi river bridge.

"Why, he thinks that's the old bridge," I half-screamed, as I guided my car up and onto the same ramp, following as closely behind him as my speed would allow.

"Oh, my God!" cried Jackie, bringing her hands to her face. "It hasn't been completed yet. The—the middle span hasn't been put in. He'll go over! He'll go over!"

She screamed then, the sound of her voice like the wail of the vanquished and, suddenly becoming aware of it, what would happen if he didn't slow up in time, a cold shudder ran down my spine. One picture burned itself on my brain in blood and agony, one sound was in my ears—the shrieking of the damned. The death that Jesse would die, unless I could save him, drowned out all other sights and sounds. The world was black, driven on by the wind, and the moonlight on the silvery rails of the new bridge gleamed like the bared fangs of a monster as Jesse went under them at high speed and onto the bridge itself.

There was no hope. I would never be able to reach him in time, to turn in sharply and cut him off before he plunged over the end and into the river, and the silvery floor of the bridge rose before me like the ascent to Calvary.

I could tell that he had lost a tremendous amount of blood, that he was weak, perhaps half-blinded by drunkenness and the wind, for his motor wobbled back and forth, and one time he almost fell off, caught himself, his arms becoming rigid.

Then, as if he saw but not in time enough to save himself, he steered the motor toward the railing. The cycle shot out like a bullet, as metal ripped

into metal, flinging Jesse off and onto the pavement. It bounced wildly, skipping through the air like a stone when it is thrown, then flew over the side. A moment later there was a loud splash.

Coming to a shrieking halt, I reined in where Jesse lay sprawled on the hard, cold pavement, careful that my headlights illuminated the area around and about him. Jackie leaped out, without slamming the door, and ran up to where he lay.

Slowly, I got out, knowing heartbrokenly that this was their moment, that I was to have no part in something so profound, so absolute. She knelt down beside him, sobbing pitifully. Slowly, reluctantly, I made my way up to them, stood back a little distance from where he lay. Every muscle, every tendon in my body shivered as I gazed at him lying there, his fine body mangled, drenched in dirt and blood. He was a broken heap, his body convulsed, his limp arms dangling as if broken in many places, his legs drawn up beneath him, they too were shapeless, formless in meaty pulps.

I let out a faint cry, as a cold shudder went through me like a raging wind. He was dying. Nothing could save him now.

He opened his eyes and fixed them feebly on Jackie, eyes now weak from loss of blood and weariness. His lips moved, parted, and he whispered faintly:

"Jackie . . . I love you . . . I . . . love . . . you."

She sank down over him, sobbing openly, her

head on his chest, her long dark hair in fantastic sails, tossed by the wintry wind.

Then, as if he were aware of my presence, he looked at me a long, painful look, a look that tore through my heart and to the back of my soul. He tried to smile, and lifted one hand accusingly.

"See . . . how you . . . do me?" he mumbled, as his mouth became filled with blood. I shrieked, let out tiny moans, began to sob as hysterically as Jackie.

Then he was gone. He was gone into everlasting darkness.

Jackie rose up, stood mutely looking sadly down at him, her hands coiled together in front, this brave, courageous girl, her figure framed against the towering silver spires of the bridge, her dress blowing in billowing cascades, slapping against her shapely legs, as the wind howled itself out of the night.

I stood watching them, thinking about small things that tortured my throbbing heart. He would never dance again nor laugh nor cry, nor would his fine body ever glow with passion and love, nor his eyes leap with mischief and delight, reckless, daring, filled with radiance and the gusty love of life. Never again would his sparkling motor feel the warmth of his thighs nor the steadiness of his hard hands on the bars. Never again would he blush nor smile shyly, like a small boy, and joke and kid, or snatch me into his arms saying, "Give me a kiss, you bitch,"

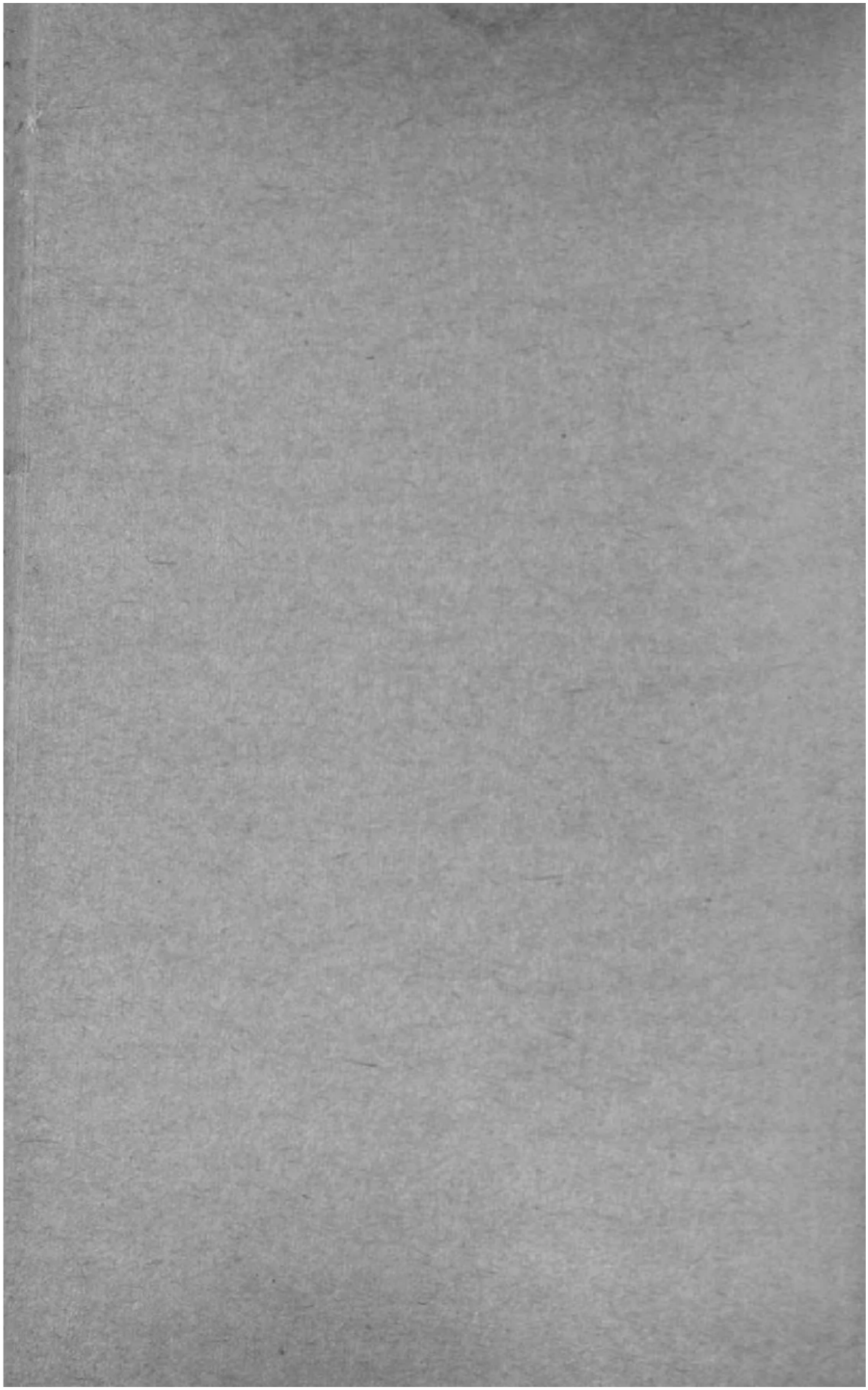
nor flounder with me in bed, loving me, thrilling me.

"Jesse," I cried beneath my breath, as my heart heard and leaped frantically inside my chest, and the sound of his name in the wind driven darkness was awful and piercing, deep with horror, the voice of a soul driven mad by a lost love and torture.

Jesse!

The sound echoed in the freezing arches of the sky, and rolled back unanswered to the cold, desolate earth.

EPILOGUE



The funeral was to be held at two o'clock that following afternoon, and there came a storm that early morning. Rain rustled on the windows of my apartment and the wind roared in the magnolias in the courtyard. The air was full of leaves, whirling, boiling, as in a caldron. From the streets and from the buildings, from the spire of the capitol to the river, came the roar of the vanquished.

But by noon the storm abated, the sun came out, and the naked limbs of the trees, black against the death gray sky, sparkled like diamonds.

I had never seen so many people at a funeral in my life. A stream almost a mile long filed into the cemetery, mostly made up of the very young and most of them girls around Jesse's and my age,

people he had known and loved a little . . . in the honkytonks and bars and lounges scattered over Baton Rouge, and among them, surprisingly to me, were older men of station and rank, many of them prominent business men of the city. They filed by the casket in an endless stream, their faces drawn, white, dressed out in their Sunday best. And flowers! His grave was a mountain of red roses!

There were hundreds of wreaths too of pale lavender lilies, white carnations, astors, wound with fern and silken tulle. And giant urns of live fern and tropical plants, and miniature nosegays of violets and hot house orchids.

I parked my car within the entrance to the cemetery and made my way alone up to the gravesite, picking my way among the stately tombs. One of them had been uprooted by the early storm, smashed. It lay prone, and its fall had carried half the tomb away with it, so that it yawned darkly. A headstone lay in the path, and the text, which I read sadly, without mind, without emotion: "In sure and certain hope of the resurrection," was half obliterated. Looking up at the grave the world and everything in it seemed cold, hardened. In the bitter sunlight and the greenish mounds the cemetery took on an unreal quality, as if everything was built of wavering, vanishing material, and stood somewhere outside space on some pale, crumbling shore.

As if in a dream I heard the preacher's quiet, clannish voice, as the wind sifted through the dark

cedars, as a bird sang in the top of a dead tree near the cemetery wall. Felt, almost ominously, a feeling of fatality, each time the steady breeze shook the black limbs of the tall shrubs and drops of water fell down on my hat, my shoulders like drops of fresh blood.

When it was over I went sadly back to my car, speaking to no one, waited until the enormous crowd had filed down the little path and out the wrought-iron gate, everyone except Jackie.

She still stood on the knoll like a courageous huntress. She too was dressed in black, complete with mourning veil. She remained for a timeless time, dry-eyed, her face so white it was noticeable beneath the dark screen of her veil. Then, stooping, she broke off one of the red roses and made her way slowly, despairingly down the hill. When she got even with me, she paused. Her eyes were on mine, shining silvery through her veil, but she said nothing.

She knew! God, I knew she knew!

Then, she moved on down the knoll and out of the gate to her car. A moment more and she sped west into the city, finally lost in the crowded distance.

I went back to the apartment.

And, looking round the rooms at all the signs of his love, I suddenly found unbearable the innocent stare of the things he had handled: the little tiny glass bubble he used for an ashtray, the Japanese

ebony tray where he piled food and sat on the bed to eat while watching television, the bathroom with the toothpaste cap still unscrewed, his soiled clothes still flung carelessly on the floor of the closet, cigarette butts on the night table, one of his rings, his jewelry box filled with gaudy cuff links, his beautiful sports coats, shoes with the exact imprint of his feet moulded into their shiny contours, the stillness, the loneliness.

God! Now the loneliness!

Then I looked down at the bed, seeing, as if from a mad dream, from some other time, some other world, his dark, naked body lying prone, one foot resting atop the other, his hands behind his head, a faint, little boy smile on his handsome face, his reckless black hair tumbling into his sparkling eyes.

I couldn't stay. I had to get out, away from the memory of him, away from everything in this apartment which reminded me sharply of him, his wonderful body, his love.

I drove, everywhere, anywhere. I came by the new bridge, sat there in the car for a numb moment looking up at the silvery structure, at the gap in the middle, my mind still unthawed on what had actually taken place, the fact that I had really lost him, that I would never see him nor make love to him again. I looked at the shining water directly below the gap in the bridge. It seemed so vast, so deep, so frightening, and I was glad it had not claimed Jesse's body, that he was buried in a ceme-

tery where he rightfully belonged, so that I could visit his grave, take flowers . . . and not at the bottom of the Mississippi River, his fine body rotting in the slime. I was glad, too, that his motor was still down there in the swirling brown depths. I never wanted to see it again, to be reminded of him who had looked so magnificent astride its glowing, irridescent metal. He had loved it more than anything on earth. It was his. And I was glad no one else would ever ride it but him. It was meant for his beautiful body, as he was meant for it.

And as I sat there in the car, gazing absently at the river, the foreign ships in the harbor, at the city sparkling in the clean sunlight, that pure silvery light always seen immediately after a storm, I began to hear the quiet tenor of his voice saying things to me, some of them meaningful, serious, casual, words sometimes filled with laughter, ridicule, sadness, tears. And one phrase which kept coming back to me, invading my mind, torturing my sore heart.

"Lily, are you going to write that book about me you said you wanted to write?"

And I knew what I had to do. Knew what I must do, the last thing I could ever do for him.

I went back to the apartment.

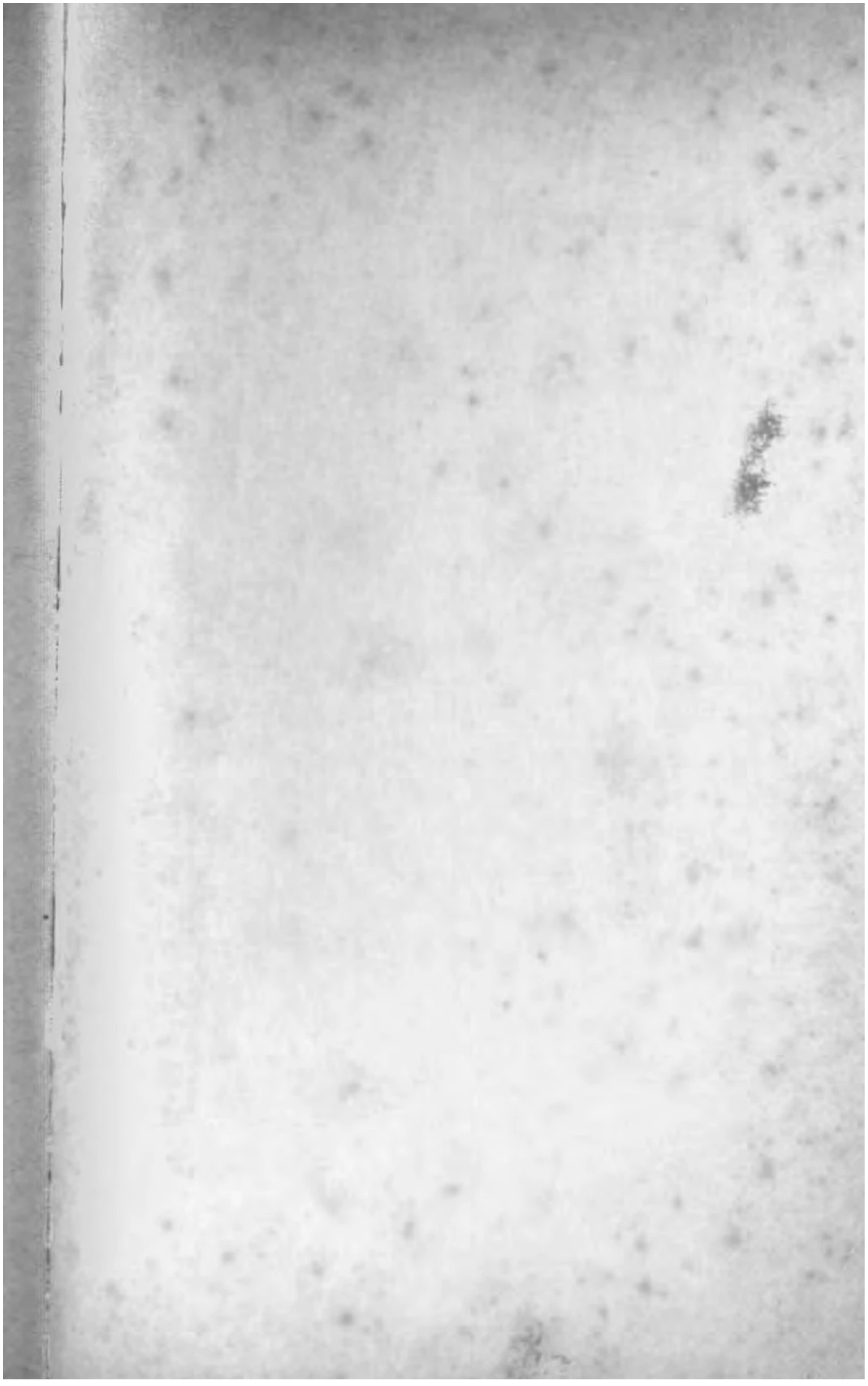
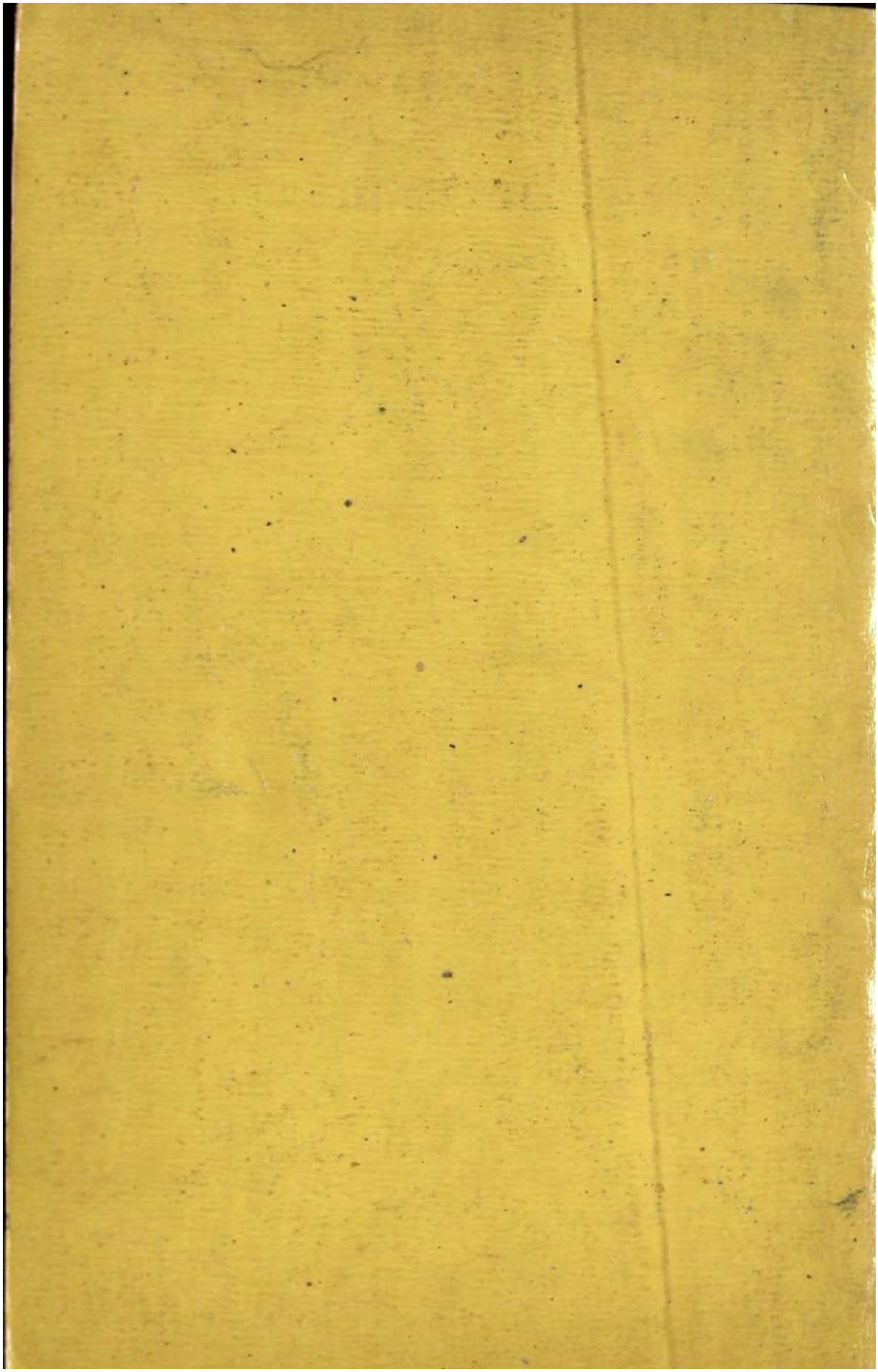
So, I have lived it all again, this time on paper, the joys, the laughter, the tears, the maddening love, the worry, the despair, the agony—and too, the awesome loneliness.

God! the loneliness!

I have written it all down, just as he would have wanted it. I have written of his male beauty, his genius for lovemaking, the goodness, the brave honesty in him when sober, the malice, the wild violence in him when drunk, the way he really lived, his drive, the things he believed about himself, what he was, what he became because of a man's love, and the desolate loss of that love. His ferocious strength, his male darkness, his terrible weaknesses, the beauty of himself as a young, virile man, full of wiles and mysterious wonders, before the torturing malformation of love, the tragedy of it, transformed him into the demon he was, a body without heart or soul, or, with so much heart he did not know which way to turn, loved by so many he became confused, bewildered, turning to drink as an escape . . . a beautiful, sexual pagan made into a wild urchin of the streets.

I have loved him, the best of him and the worst, and I have lost him forever. But my fondest memories of him will never die, the memory of him when I first met him, the way he loved, the adoration I had for his handsome, naked body, possessed with him.

His memory is the only happy face that hangs over all my existence now, my broken mind, my terrible, terrible loneliness.

So Jesse is yours now. I am giving him to the world.

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